

EDGE

NINTENDO | SONY |

| PC | HANDHELD | CO-OP | ONLINE

GRAND THEFT AUTO

CHINATOWN WARS
HOW ROCKSTAR IS REBUILDING ITS
EMPIRE OF CRIME ON NINTENDO DS

RARE INSIGHTS

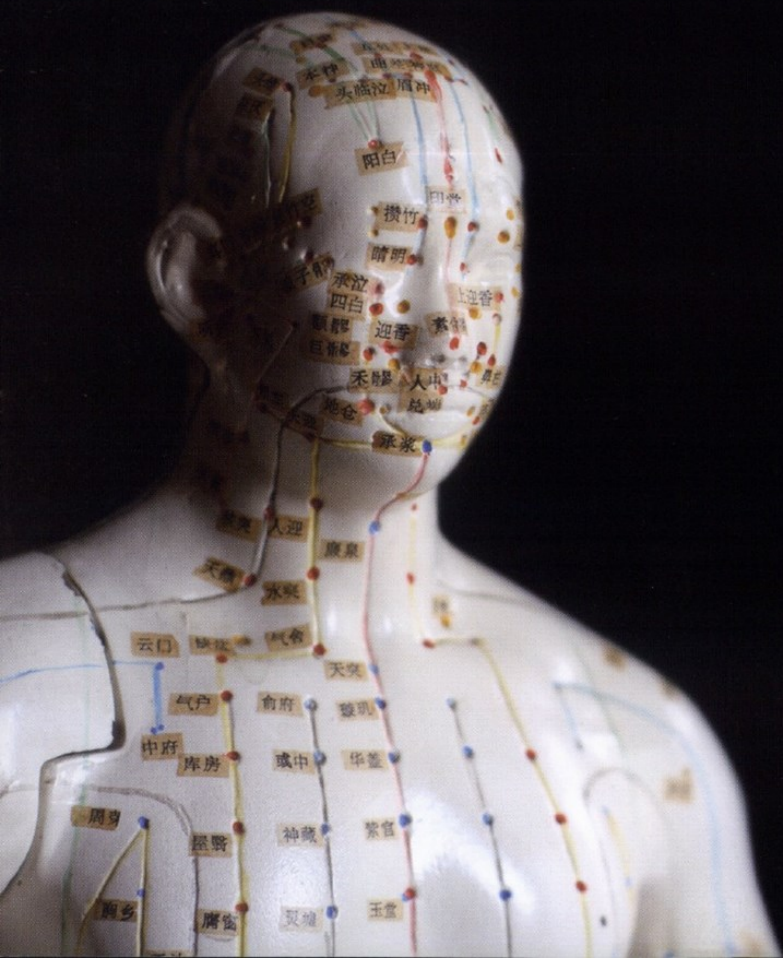
HANDS-ON WITH XBOX 360'S
BANJO-KAZOOIE: NUTS & BOLTS

ALL THE WAY TO 11

HARMONIX'S JOURNEY FROM
FREQUENCY TO ROCK BAND 2

NEW MODDING ARMY

DO-IT-YOURSELF GAME-MAKING
ENTERS THE NEXT GENERATION





Way back in 1999, we visited a fledgling Yorkshire-based game developer named Mobius. The project we visited the company to see, *Titanium Angel* on PS2, was at that point more tech demo than it was actual game, but we came away optimistic about its prospects. It may have featured a female protagonist at a time when it seemed like half of the dev studios in the western world were cooking up their own spins on the Lara Croft formula, but at least it had the insight to partner her with a hulking mechanoid, the relationship between the two intended to weave some kind of distinction into the gameplay via inspiration from *Head Over Heels*. More than that, though, Mobius' managing director, Gordon Hall, struck us as unusually determined. He was, in simple terms, the sort of person you'd trust to drive a team to deliver the goods.

Well, *Titanium Angel* never saw the light of day, cancelled at the hands of publisher SCi (now, of course, the owner of Lara Croft, thanks to its 2005 takeover of Eidos). Nevertheless, we kept an eye on Mobius and watched as it plodded along turning out a slew of mostly unmemorable licensed productions. Then, in 2003, its potential finally became realised in the form of its GBA take on Rockstar's *Max Payne*. The following year, having been so impressed by the developer, the growing Rockstar empire bought it up and rebranded it as Rockstar Leeds. Since then, it has produced three of the four best-selling PSP games to date: *Grand Theft Auto: Liberty City Stories*, *Vice City Stories* and *Midnight Club 3: Dub Edition*.

The studio's work is back on our minds this issue with *Grand Theft Auto: Chinatown Wars*, its first stab at a Nintendo DS production – and the game that created the biggest stir among attendees of Nintendo's E3 conference in July, despite appearing only in the form of a logo.

We didn't quite know what to expect from the game, not only because it is being mapped out on a new format but because it is coming in the wake of *Grand Theft Auto IV*, perhaps the most ambitious videogame of modern times. How do you go from such breathtaking scale on PlayStation 3 and Xbox 360 to the pocket-sized DS while hoping to remain true to all of the things that *GTA* represents? The answers begin on page 54.



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We meet with Dan Houser at Rockstar's New York HQ
to discuss *Grand Theft Auto: Chinatown Wars* on DS



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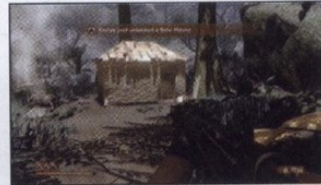
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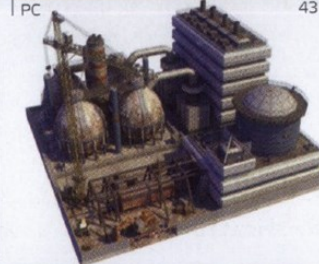


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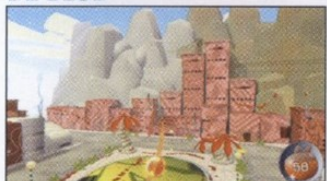
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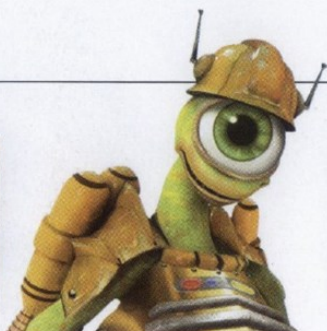


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START

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INDUSTRY

Japan cries foul as Sony and Microsoft look west

As the gaming giants' press conferences fail to impress, is this a sign of the market's diminishing importance?



Amere 24 hours after Microsoft delivered its 360 media briefing to the Japanese press on September 1, SCEJ commandeered the very same hotel in Tokyo in order to announce its end-of-year strategy. While many things set the two companies apart – their Japanese market share, their catalogue of games, their choice of accompanying music (US pop for Microsoft; jazz for SCEJ) – one thing, in the opinion of the disenchanted Japanese gaming media, seemed to unite the console giants: a bias toward the west.

Traditionally, a SCEJ conference at this time of year would be about the entire PlayStation family. PlayStation 2 would be mentioned to show how the company continues to undermine Nintendo's dominance with its perennially significant sales around the world; PSP would be touted as the must-have accessory to complete the PS3 experience; and PS3 itself would have centre stage. But, as SCEJ

The focus of the Japanese videogame industry has shifted from its domestic market to the west, creating a bigger gap between developers and gamers in Japan



president **David Reeves** quipped the previous month at Leipzig's Games Convention: "The times they are a-changin'."

The focus of the Japanese videogame industry has shifted from its domestic market to the west, creating a bigger gap between developers and gamers in Japan. Simultaneously, a new generation of SCEJ executives has been ushered in to ensure that PlayStation adapts to such times. With Japanese PS3 sales persisting at a weekly rate only a few thousand above that of PS2, Sony chose to dedicate its conference to PSP, currently enjoying another resurgence thanks to Capcom's *Monster Hunter Portable* – the popularity of which has eclipsed the handheld on which it runs to the extent that PSPs are

now often referred to as 'Mohan' players.

But even as SCEJ president Shawn Layden celebrated PSP's successes in Japan, he managed to do little to reassure the tetchy audience that Sony still had the concerns of Japanese gamers specifically in mind. Journalists could not help but note that familiar figurehead Kaz Hirai was nowhere to be seen, and the feeling of national disenfranchisement was further amplified by grumbles about Layden's level of Japanese. While fluent in the language, Layden tended to pronounce English words without Japanese inflection, occasionally making him difficult to understand. Though a faux pas of minor proportions, it was nonetheless taken as an indication of the company's increasingly western outlook, particularly given that many of the announcements seemed designed to nudge Sony's handheld towards the global market.

In mimicry of Ken Kutaragi's reveal of the original PSP, Layden drew the PSP-3000 from his jacket pocket, detailing its improved LCD screen, microphone and interconnectivity with PS3. It did not go unnoticed that, excepting the new screen, many of these improvements directly target western proclivities, or use services that are as yet unavailable in Japan. Japanese media were unmoved by the potential for Skype



BNG's announcement of PSP's *Gundam VS Gundam* marked the first addition to the VS series in two years, although some noted its similarity to the recently released *Gundam Battle Universe*

The Japanese press seemed quick to criticise SCEJ's Shawn Layden, but the barbs thrown at his level of Japanese pronunciation masked deeper fears about Sony's westernisation



From Software, the developer of *Tenchu*, revealed more of the upcoming 360 exclusive *Ninja Blade* – but this token nod towards a hardcore Japanese market enamoured with big swords and demons didn't quite manage to stir the embers of the assembled press



communication, or in-game voice-chat – seen as a predominantly western facility associated with firstperson shooters and contrary to the kind of face-to-face socialisation that has made PSP such a success in Japan. Neither were attendees especially enthused by the possibility of playing PSP games online via PS3. Layden's example of *Monster Hunter Portable 2nd Generation* as one such game fell flat: though immensely popular, the *Monster Hunter* experience has become deeply associated with physical proximity, with players gathering together in order to play. Once again, it was seen as a move to court western audiences keen on online play but less hot on the kind of ad-hoc network gaming popular in Japan. The possibility of using your PSP to access the PlayStation Store directly was received with more enthusiasm, but once again overshadowed by the question of when Sony would announce a video-on-demand service for Japan.

Of all the new features being brought to PSP, it was the new LCD screen that impressed

audiences the most, although even this did not come without caveats. While concerns about a reduced battery life have since been refuted by Sony, developers present at the conference expressed consternation that the different quality of display might not benefit visual effects created with the preceding screen's limitations in mind. One specific example was *Monster Hunter Portable's* snow effect, reputed to suffer from the transition to the new screen, and leading to speculation over whether SCE might somehow implement a software switch between an 'old' and 'new' LCD mode.

With all the talk of hardware and media interoperability, the gamers in the audience were getting a little restless, and were given only the

briefest of rewards with the announcement of *Patapon 2*. Although *LocoRoco 2* and the *Ratchet & Clank* series were also mentioned, the Japanese media was clearly expecting more, and the lack of an update to the *Monster Hunter Portable* franchise was seen as something of a crucial hole in the line-up for the year's important fourth quarter. Though the game could yet be announced at the Tokyo Game Show in October, the absence of Capcom at the conference was not seen as a good omen for a platform which owes its current success to the *Monster Hunter* series.

If Sony's latest developments were a tough sell, then it was plain sailing in comparison to Microsoft's efforts to attract Japanese interest in its console. While Sony's conference suggested a move towards the global stage that disgruntled its domestic audience, Microsoft has struggled to gain Japanese approval from the very beginning. Up until recently, it appeared that no amount of price cutting could convince the country of the console's worth. The release of *Tales Of Vesperia* boosted sales in the region enough for the console to experience a rare shortage, but this was also partly a result of Microsoft's reticence to replenish its usually slow-to-move stock given that the arrival of the 60GB model is just around the corner.

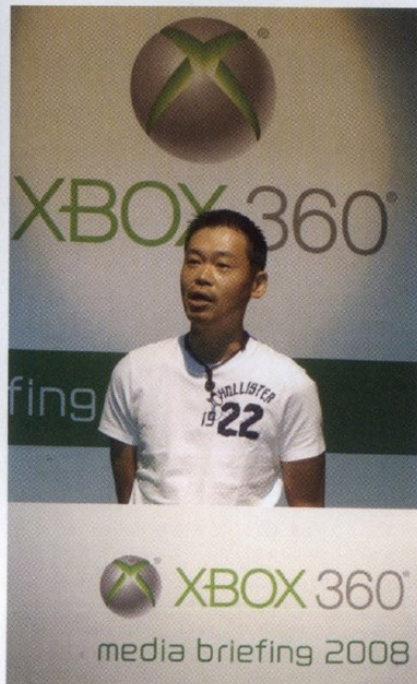
Despite this recent flurry of sales, few members of the Japanese press came to Microsoft's conference expecting big announcements in the wake of E3, and they were duly rewarded with precious little to write about. The briefing's primary purpose was to confirm a further price cut to the current range of 360 systems, reducing the Arcade unit by just over a third of its price to ¥19,800 (£105), making the cheapest 360 on the world stage even cheaper than a Wii. Though



Despite the negativity expressed about the 60GB HDD unit in the Japanese media, it will be a necessity in the future for users of video-on-demand services. Still, it's hardly surprising that being asked to wait for technology to become useful rankles somewhat



Takashi Sensui (left), general manager of Microsoft's Xbox Division, was joined on stage by the likes of Capcom's Keiji Inafune (below), who talked directly about the Japanese industry's relationship with the west. Capcom sees itself as a bridge between these markets, bringing western-flavoured games like *Dead Rising* to Japan while exporting Japanese culture, such as in *Okami*'s use of sumi-e. "There have been fewer and fewer Japanese games with worldwide impact," he admitted, however



Microsoft's attempt to shift its old inventory before the release of a new model is reasonable enough, the Japanese press left wondering exactly why they should be inclined to buy a 60GB 360. While Japan will receive the renovated 360 dashboard, along with Mii-like avatars, it still will not have the access to video-on-demand or download services available in other regions that would make use of the extended hard drive capacity. Though the general manager of Microsoft's Xbox Division, Takashi Sensui, did raise the point that installing games on to the hard drive would make the 360 hardware significantly quieter, there was a sense of resentment that, for the sake of standardisation, the Japanese market should now have to purchase a system which is not designed for its immediate

There was a sense of resentment that the Japanese market should now have to purchase a system which is not designed for its immediate requirements

requirements and that it will have to wait to enjoy an experience as complete as that of the US.


If the lesson to be taken from the release of *Tales Of Vesperia* is that a Japanese-targeted software catalogue could turn the fortunes of the 360 around, then there was curiously little sign of a commitment to this policy at Microsoft's conference. There was only one single-platform title announced that was specifically geared to Japanese tastes, From Software's *Ninja Blade*, and even this received a less-than-rapturous response. Elsewhere, the titles were either crossplatform, such as *Pro Evolution Soccer 2009* and *Resident Evil 5*, or clearly of a western milieu, as in the case of *Fable II* and *Mass Effect*. The final presentation was

crossplatform western-developed title *Fallout 3*, confirming it for a December 2 release in Japan.

A portion of this gloomy atmosphere can be attributed to the usual belly-aching and simple short-sightedness – video-on-demand and other services that require expanded hard drives will eventually be launched in Japan, and it is not out of an unwillingness to make money that Sony and

Microsoft have struggled to implement them there. Nonetheless, there is a definite sense in which both platform manufacturers are looking to the larger market of the west to drive many of their products'

developments. If this did not detract from their Japanese offerings then there would be little reason to be disgruntled – but with Japanese software developers also looking to broach a global market, the particular qualities associated with the region may find themselves relegated to an ever-decreasing number of titles, fundamentally altering Japanese gaming culture.

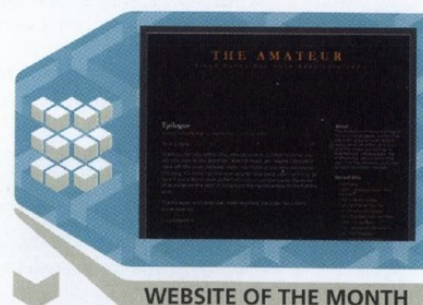
TGS, which should see the spotlight fall on PS3 rather than PSP, will be a useful barometer – hopefully seeing announcements from Square Enix and Team Ico. How much the big names court the west will set the path for the rest of the Japanese videogame industry, but can they surprise a Japanese media so ready to be disappointed? 

NewsWire

TECMO
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Koei don't carp as Square Enix left hungry

Following the general chaos at Tecmo recently – Tomonobu Itagaki's departure and lawsuit, the class-action suit filed by former developers of *Team Ninja*, and the resignation of president Yoshimi Yasuda – Square Enix made an offer of a friendly takeover on August 29. Expecting a reply by September 4, the JRPG giant was gazumped by the arrival of Koei on the scene: a merger of Koei and Tecmo now seems the most likely outcome, and the companies released a joint statement to this effect: 'Through a merger, we expect we can grow further by respecting both companies' identities and having an environment in which employees can fully exhibit their skills'.



Playing games is fun; playing with games is funny. The Amateur is a recently concluded jaunt through *Hitman: Blood Money*, written from the perspective of the bald man himself – except, rather than being the professional the game demands, he cocks it up as much as we all do. Death is a regular, if temporary, occurrence. But the plucky Amateur keeps to his guns, often 'nobly legs it', and at the time of writing an epilogue has just appeared. If nothing else, it'll make you want to try out some of those ridiculous costumes again, and the medical advice in mission IV should be adopted by all stealth games.

Site: [The Amateur](http://www.silentamateur.wordpress.com)
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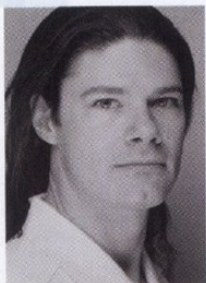


Out of the monster closet

Id is readying its first new IP since Quake, but can it shed the hallmarks of the old school?

While the smattering of trailers have teased us with the prospect of speeding through sprawling, dusty canyons and gunning down mutants, id has been pretty tight on details about its upcoming title, *Rage*. CEO **Todd Hollenshead** and creative director **Tim Willits** have cautiously highlighted a few details about the game – its post-apocalyptic environments are larger and its gameplay more freeform than in previous id games, and the additional driving component is an obvious departure. We sat down with the pair to ask if the classic id run-and-gun action can still cut it.

"If you told someone ten years ago the PC power we have today they would think that you had just granted them infinity"



Hollenshead (left) dismisses John Carmack's worries about Xbox 360: "All these issues are going to be resolved." Willits agrees: "I think it was just late and he didn't have enough Diet Coke"



So, the new franchise, the greater choice, larger worlds, driving and so on – is this a sign that the shooter has moved on since the early days of id?

Todd Hollenshead: What makes a great FPS game isn't the same as it once was, but it has the same basic concept today: the FPS combat experience has to feel good. The weapons have to feel unique and when you use them they have to feel powerful, and you need enemies to be threatening and act in believable ways. Of course, to build a whole game around it requires more than just that core step, but if you don't execute on that then I don't think you'll have a very good game.

Has the criticism you received over *Doom 3*'s use of old-school game techniques such as monster closets prompted you to look into new mechanics?

Tim Willits: Well, after *Doom* we started a new IP that was more of a classic horror shooter – but John Carmack's technology allowed us the flexibility and power to do so much more. With the megatexture technology we are able to build these vast canyons and cliffs and whatnot and so the decision to work on *Rage* was driven by the power that idTech 5 gives us. And we wanted to go for a new genre. We have *Wolfenstein*, *Doom*, *Quake*, and we want to keep them all as separate games. And speaking of idTech 5 technology, one of the great things about it is that we can use the same assets and the same development team to work on the PC,

360, PS3 and even the Mac, and all those are being developed internally. In the past we'd work on the PC version and put an outside developer on the console versions.

The last iteration of idTech didn't proliferate like competing thirdparty engines – why do you think that was?

TH: To be frank about it, there were probably a couple of reasons. Number one was that it was really PC-centric at a time when the demand for engines was in transition from bi-platform to multi-platform. Also the fact that the Xbox version came out but there wasn't a 360 version until later and it wasn't as good as it probably should have been. Then there wasn't a PS3 version until much later. These are just market dynamics. But then the engine was written to do *Doom 3*, it wasn't really written with the primary focus being licensing. There are some other things as well. It was tricky technology to work with – you have to be very clever as a level designer with respect to how you light things. And it was a very different process from how you work with idTech 5 or many competing technologies or the *Quake III* type stuff. It made it less approachable. It took us a long time to learn it effectively – although it was very powerful when you learnt it.

How does id see itself now? Is it a licensor of IPs and engines, or a game developer first and foremost?

TH: Game developer, absolutely.



But so many of your IPs are worked on externally nowadays...

TH: Yeah, well, we're sort of in a transition on that. That's coming back the other way now. We don't make press releases about this kind of thing because we think our company strategy isn't really newsworthy for fans. We're not trying to inflate our stock price or anything. But we have the team that's working on *Rage*, the next *Doom* game is already being developed at id and *Quake Live* is being developed internally as well. *Wolfenstein* is being developed by Raven, but our experience is that we do a better job of controlling the problematic issues that relate to the quality of the games if we have them under our roof and under our control.

TW: The company is still very small. We're 60 people now – which is huge for us. But during development of *Doom 3* the company was 26 or 27. So we try and keep it small; we don't have a licensing department because we want to focus on making the games.

How do you think the PC platform is looking?

TH: The PC market has its challenges as an exclusive or primary platform. The consoles have taken things that were unique to the PC – online play and communities, things like that – and invaded that space. But if you step back, and look at *The Sims* or *World Of Warcraft* – these are big PC titles that sell tons of units.

But is there a plateau in hi-tech PC gaming?

TH: I don't think so at all. If you told someone ten



"John [Carmack] wants to do some 'gee-whiz' features, for the PC," says Willits. "Simply because the technology moves much faster on the PC than on consoles." Id hopes to make vehicles feel like an extension of your firstperson avatar. Willits: "We want to make the feel of the driving and the combat as intuitive as possible for firstperson fans"

years ago the power we have today they would think that you had just granted them infinity, but the reality is that there's no such thing. We'll use as much power as we can get and the games will be the better for it. What drives the games industry is innovation, not just in game design but technological innovation on both the hardware and software side.

The two games you mention as huge PC titles are both really scaleable. Do you think there are enough people playing high-spec games on PCs?

TH: I hope so. *Rage* will probably have the deepest penetration relative to what we've done in the past. Relative to a lo-spec game? Well, I wouldn't call *Rage* that!



BANGAI CHARGE!

In the world of promotional stunts, this is a good one. D3 Publisher has challenged several leading development studios to make the best creation with the *Bangai-O Spirits* level creator, including Infinity Ward, Naughty Dog, Infinite Interactive, Arkane Studios, Vicious Cycle and Fizz Factor (part of Foundation 9). The 'Bangai-O Spirits Elite Level Design Contest' will award \$10,000 in the winner's name as a student bursary at The Guildhall at the Southern Methodist University in Texas, which seems like a jolly good idea. The levels are available for download at IGN along with commentaries from each of the designers.



"I don't think that developing for the PS3 is hard at all. It was much harder developing for the Famicom. It's true. I mean, give someone who's developing for the PS3 a Famicom and see if they can make a game for it. They won't be able to. Yeah, that'll prove it. We'll bet a drink on it."

Programmers, Tomonobu Itagaki challenges you

"If it puts little plastic guitars into kids' hands and fires their imaginations, I think that's a good thing. It's harmless fun, innit. I'd rather that genre of videogames than somebody getting their fucking head chopped off with a samurai sword while getting fucked by a goblin up the arse with a laser. Do you know what I mean?"

Yeah, kind of, Noel Gallagher

"The VP pick... I think she's, you know, kind of cute. She's the perfect definition of a MILF. Not to, you know, disparage her or anything. I'm not trying to sort of make it about that, but it's like that's what I see when I look at her. I didn't love Hillary but I looked at her and I saw experience and intelligence... You look at this woman and you see a MILF."

David Jaffe shares his own brand of political commentary regarding Sarah Palin

"Parents who use videogames as a babysitter shouldn't have sex to begin with."

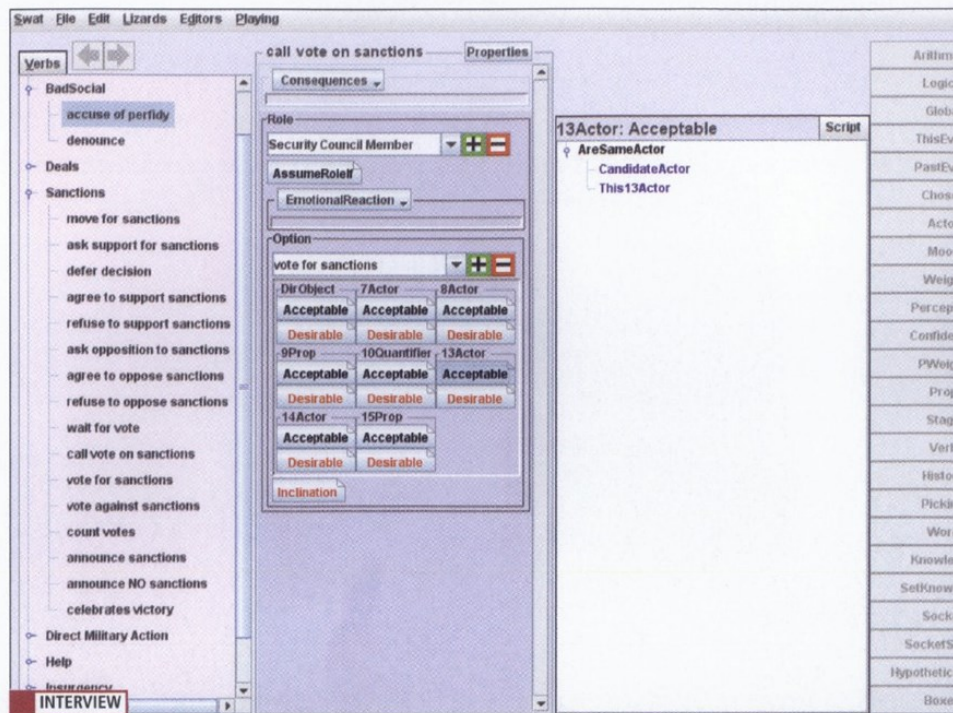
Former Nintendo Of America marketing chief Perrin Kaplan offers some parenting advice

"I turned to the interpreter and said: 'Tell him, 'Fuck you'. Naka had lived in the US for three years, so I knew he understood. I walked out and never returned."

Peter Moore recalls probably not one of his happiest days at Sega, when he told Sonic creator Yuji Naka that his little blue hedgehog wasn't so cool any more

"The story for *The Dishwasher* is largely skippable, mainly because you have to actually read it. Of course, to be fair, we may have missed an avid explanation as to why the game is not a dating sim as well as a few stern warnings about the dire state of the Earth's climate."

James Silva applies modern indie tenets to his upcoming XBLA game *The Dishwasher*, and finds it wanting



The Crawford redemption

The man behind Storytron explains why he left the videogame industry, and why it's taken 16 years to create his magnum opus

Depending on your age, Chris Crawford may or may not be a familiar name. If it's unfamiliar, you may have missed some of his renowned '80s work – the likes of *Balance Of Power* and *Trust And Betrayal*, and 'toys' like *Gossip* (a 'social interaction' Atari 400 game). You may also be unaware that he founded the Game Developer's Conference. But Crawford gave up on game design, and the industry, in 1992 to "face his dragon" by pursuing interactive storytelling. Sixteen years later, Storytron is "99 per cent complete" – comprising the Storyteller software that a player uses, and the Storyworld Authoring Tool (SWAT, above) that lets anyone create their own storyworld. Crawford's even working on a new proof-of-concept version of *Balance Of Power*. We asked him to explain what he's been up to.

"We urge people to keep it simple, small: simple things can lead to very complex behaviours. We've found that a dozen personality attributes is plenty"

Could you describe what your take is on the concept of interactive storytelling?

Interactive storytelling is an entertainment in which the player engages in rich, meaningful, emotional interaction with computer characters.

So explain how the SWAT works: do you have to set up characters and then define their behaviour in response to each possible verb?

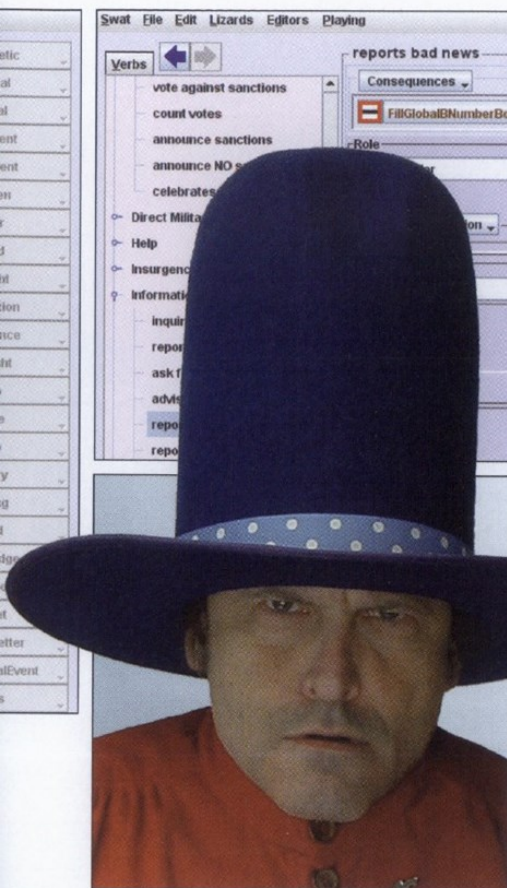
Oh god, no. You don't do combinations based on

the actor himself, you do the calculations based on the actor's personality traits. So a very simple example would be verb 'punch', Joe punches Fred, Fred has two choices, he can run away or he can hit back. You could base that decision only on temper, or what we call anger-fear: if Fred is a fearful kind of guy he's going to run away, and if he's an angry kind of guy he'll hit back. And once you've established that simple little formula it applies to every actor.

How many characteristics can you have?

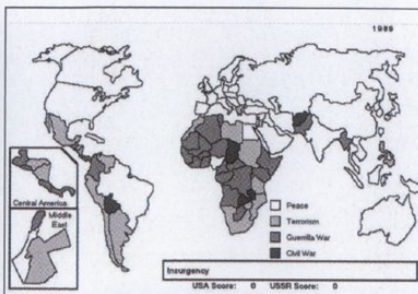
As many as you want. We urge people to keep it simple, small: simple things can lead to very complex behaviours. We've found that a dozen personality attributes is plenty for most cases. We expect that with the passage of time, as



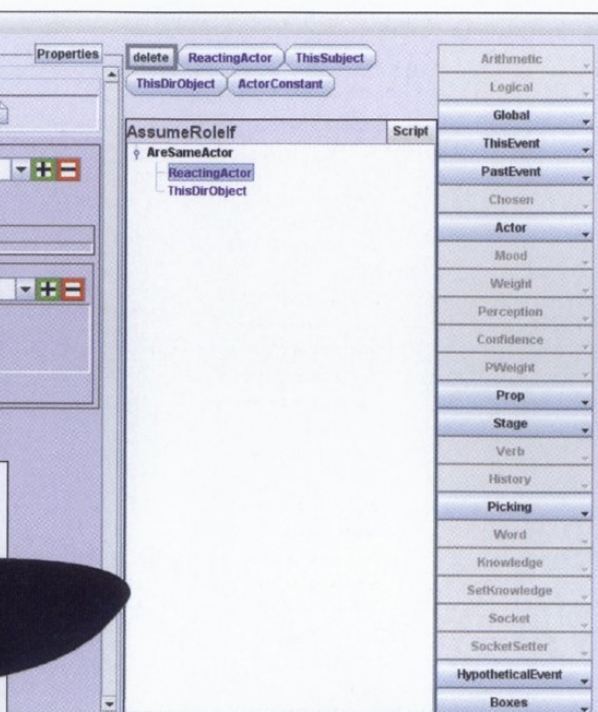


storyworlds get more complex, people will put in more personality attributes, and we know that beginners will put in too many. We think you can do a very good storyworld with a dozen.

You've been developing this now for 16 years – that's longer than your previous career making games. Did you understand the scale of what you were doing when you started? No. If I had understood what I was getting myself into, I would not have had the courage to attempt this. It's just huge, and the number of mistakes that had to be made to get here – I have thrown away much more technology than I have built. This is hard stuff! And that's why there have been a lot of people pecking away at the problem but they haven't really... They've made some interesting



Legionnaire (left) cast you as Julius Caesar defending Roman territory from barbarians – despite its simplicity, it's one of the best early RTSes. 1985's *Balance Of Power* (above) was a delicate game of nuclear brinkmanship in which you played either the US president or the general secretary of the Soviet communist party



progress in some ways – the best example would be Michael Mateas and Andrew Stern, who did *Faade*, and *Faade* is the first working interactive storyworld. I like to compare it with the Wright brothers' airplane – they were the first guys to get it in the air, but their airplane wasn't practical and couldn't be commercialised. They were taking a completely different approach than I did and I think their approach is kind of a dead end, but it still works.

Is SWAT designed to be used by anyone?

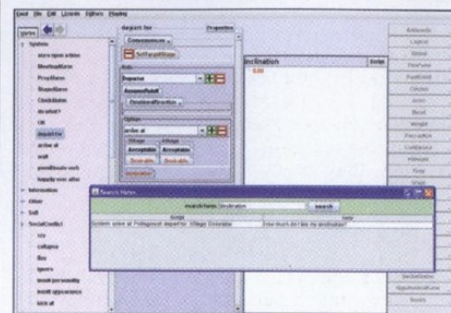
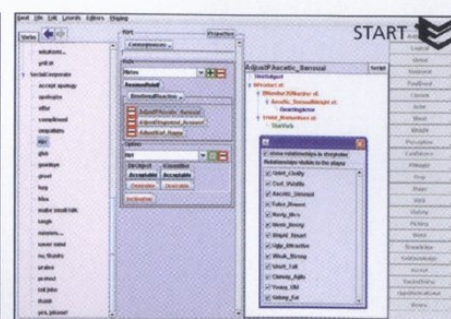
Yeah, there are an enormous number of requirements to get interactive storytelling working and the most difficult was designing it so other people could build storyworlds with the technology. I spent between two-thirds and three-quarters of my total effort on that: making it accessible to other people was the killer problem. But without that, there's nothing! One person, me alone, doing interactive storytelling adds up to a puke, pathetic little effort. A lot of people need to be involved, bringing their creativity to it, pulling it in directions. Another way I've put this is that I'm not just building a project or a company. I am building an industry. And in order to do that you've got to bring in a lot of people.

You're building an industry?

Yeah, I know, I know [laughs]. Let's say I'm laying the groundwork or whatever. This is the starting effort. But the realisation that that's the necessary task is what's important. Sixteen years ago for me the fundamental realisation was that the game industry was never going to do interactive storytelling – a lot of people pay lip-service to it, but the economics are all wrong to them right now. Once you realise that the games industry can't do it you're forced into the realisation that you need a new industry – so if you wanna make it happen, you've got to build a new industry. It's not so much vainglory as necessity.

When you last addressed the game industry, you said that you had to do this, to face your dragon. Are you ready now?

Ah. No... Well, I'm ready to face him, but I can't stand up to him yet. I don't think I'll ever get there. But in the last 16 years I have been working on that and I think I've made real progress, but there is still an enormous amount of work that has to be done. The Storytron technology is nowhere near good enough, it's still far too difficult to use and far too constraining, but I think I can say I've taken a whack at it. More than a nick, but less than a wound.



Crawford on funding: "It's self-funded. Well, there are two things: one is that we made a lot of money back in the '80s, and we did not spend it, we saved it. Two, you wanna know the real secret? The secret for success in the games industry? Have a wife with a steady job!"

Continue

Stephen Fry
And we thought games were beneath him. Hah

DQIV's translation
Haud yer wheesh! This is a brow bit of localisation

Sega freebies
Some top tat, and not a Sonic keyring in sight

Quit

EA's petrol panic
What happens when a PR stunt goes a little bit awry

PC upgrade trauma
We're caught in the noose of the SATA cable

Moving house
Holding on to all those old consoles? Bad idea

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INTERVIEW

Made for making

Big or little, Alex Evans says that it's what you do with it that counts

As development on *LittleBigPlanet* finally comes to a close, we sat down with Media Molecule co-founder **Alex Evans** to discuss how building a game that lets its players build their own games has changed the way he works, what happens to everything once it goes live, and why he wants the company's first game to be unrecognisable at next year's GDC.

LittleBigPlanet seemed robust even when we played it a while ago. Can you throw whatever you like at it without it falling over?

Not always, but everything in our game is user-generated, so even the developer content actually goes through the user-generated content pipeline, which means that literally everything you do is live. There's no compile step, there's no running it through an exporter – basically, the goal was that you're editing with both hands on the controller. Our tools are completely different from

a traditional game. Accidentally, by nature of being user-generated, we went a totally different route and it paid off by being this iterative thing in which I can literally load a texture in Photoshop and it updates live in the game while I'm drawing on the texture.

With that system in place, can you imagine making a game any other way now?

No. And the problem is that whenever it breaks it's a bit like when the internet goes down and everyone goes: "What do I do now? I don't understand!" And it's the same thing with our game – a while ago we got a new SDK update from Sony and it broke part of our live update system. There was this guy going: "I can't edit my level any more because it takes two minutes between making a change and being able to play

"LittleBigPlanet is about the content people create, and I think people will be quite surprised by what we can do and how far we can take it. The DLC won't simply be us making stickers"

with it – I can't cope, I need it to be [clicks fingers] live". That was really nice; it was a design we thought we were doing for the users, but it's turned out to be great for us.

In terms of additional content via DLC, will you be able to ship new mechanical elements or will it be just new visual assets?

We can do both. This isn't a promise that we will, but we can actually embed logic into objects after the fact. The example I always give is that if people really want fruit machines working, we can do that. I always thought we'd end up with more intelligent objects in the game than we have: fruit machines, guitars, that kind of thing. It's turned

out that our level designers prefer the basics and build the fruit machine out of switches and levers, which is mental to me. But if the community wants fruit machines we can put new gameplay logic into the game on a rolling basis. So that might be new gameplay modes or something, maybe something that changes the scoring. Texture packs are easy to do and it'd be criminal not to do them, but it's things like... There is some good stuff coming, but I've got to bite my tongue.

The first thing you'll want to do after launch, presumably, is turn away from the game and have a break – but you can't.

No, you can't. Luckily, I've made that mistake already. The biggest mistake I made in the industry was after I worked on *Black & White* and I said there was no way I would work on *Black & White 2* for at least a year – and I ended up not working on it at all. What I should have said was: "We can do so much with *Black & White* – let's do a PS2 version now", but I was a young kid then, and I could have been

bolshy and pushed things through. It's getting to that mindset that it's not a constraint to make DLC or anything. Quite the opposite: *LBP* is about the content people create, and I think that people will be surprised by what we can do and how far we can take it. I really don't think it'll just be stickers. Stickers are fine, and they will be there, of course, but I want to shock myself. I want to be at GDC next year when someone does a *LittleBigPlanet* reveal and no one knows it's *LittleBigPlanet*.

So when do you get a holiday?

I get a month in September. That has to happen or I'll bust a blood vessel.

That development process in full: "We wondered how to do explosives, and there were loads of arguments, and meanwhile the level designers just made a bunch of stuff"

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Nathan Fisher (Lead Artist)

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HARDWARE

TV on PS3

PS3's media convergence continues with the release of PlayTV, but can it really become the do-it-all-box under the television?

Sony took another step towards its aim of making PS3 the central entertainment hub in the living room with the release of PlayTV in the UK on September 19. The twin-tuner digital TV receiver gives PS3 the functionality available from digital video recorders by displaying DVB-T broadcasts (known as Freeview in the UK), recording a programme to the PS3's hard drive while watching another, and allowing for live TV to be paused and 'rewound'.

It's functionality, then, that many people already own, especially given the popularity of the Sky+ digital TV recorder and the growth of sales in standalone units. And, since most PS3 owners have HDTVs, which often have digital tuners built in, few will be looking for an alternative Freeview box. At

It doesn't provide the instant access expected from TV. From switching on to getting to watch something takes over 30 seconds and requires several button presses

£70, PlayTV is a little pricey for a digital tuner but cheap for a PVR, and includes a visually appealing and responsive interface. It also proves slightly more sensitive to weak signals than the built-in tuner in the TV on which we tested it.

PlayTV sits as a separate application in a dedicated entry in the XMB called TV, which lies between Game and Video, and recordings can run in the background while playing games (though not PS2 titles), DVDs and Blu-rays. PlayTV throws up a warning that the quality of both the recording and the game or video being played may suffer,



The PlayTV package consists of a small plastic box (pictured, top) containing dual tuners, a USB cable that connects it to your PlayStation 3, a disc containing the installation software and a simple demo video, and an overlay for the console's Bluetooth remote



The interface is a translucent overlay over live TV. PlayTV will be released across Europe before the end of the year and in Australia in early 2009, but it seems unlikely that it will be released in North America, since the region uses a different digital TV standard

but we found that both *Burnout Paradise's* constant 60 frames per second and the recording were unsullied. Recordings can be cued in advance using the electronic programming guide – the PS3 hardware will automatically awaken to make the recording before going back to standby.

In terms of base functionality, therefore, PlayTV can do all that standard digital video recorders can do, and does it well. But it seems unlikely that that many PS3 owners will use PlayTV as their principal TV viewing platform – or, indeed, be able to convince other household members of its charms. Crucially, it does not provide the instantly accessible experience we expect from normal TV: from switching on the PS3 console to getting to watch something takes over 30 seconds and requires several button presses. As if expectant of PlayTV's success, the tuner box frustratingly lacks an aerial passthrough, which means you'll need to switch the cable from the back of the TV each time you want to use it (or use a splitter), a niggle that joins the unsightly fact that its USB cable must be plugged in to the front of the console.

For all its visual sheen, the interface has its irritations. Choosing a programme from the EPG requires two button presses, and as you scroll through, the highlighted programme is always placed at the very top or bottom of the displayed channels, so you can't see what's ahead. Such issues can easily be addressed with firmware updates, of course, but, more fundamentally, PlayTV confusingly fails to follow the unified control scheme Sony has carefully implemented through all PS3's other media capabilities. The triangle button, which normally brings up contextual options, now



Mixed media

What can you do with PlayTV recordings?

Sony recently refuted initial claims that PlayTV would create standard video files that could be freely moved off the hard drive, but with the software we've used it is actually easily achieved. They must first be moved from the PlayTV application to the XMB, where they can be played or copied to other storage media. Though they're saved in Sony's own M2TS format, which so far hasn't betrayed any copy or time limitations, we had no problems playing them on PCs using the VLC media player.



Useful for single-TV households, PlayTV can use Remote Play functions, so live TV and recordings can be displayed on a PSP

dumps you back at the main menu which, as a carousel of revolving icons, doesn't quite follow the XMB's template. Video playback within PlayTV also uses a slightly different interface and button configuration to videos played from the XMB. And it's frustrating to have to load PlayTV to access them – why couldn't they also appear in a list on PlayTV's XMB channel?

The result is an application that fails to feel integral to the PlayStation 3 experience, even if it tries to be by being directly represented on the XMB. It's a factor that could ultimately mean PlayTV will end up as another useful tool among PS3's range of Swiss Army knife capabilities rather than pushing the console into occupying a more essential position under the TV.



A Scott with a plan

Reset Generation's producer reveals how MP3s and YouTube could transform the videogames market

I want to be a chain-smoking Peter Drucker," announced **Scott Foe**, the Nokia producer behind new N-Gage and PC game *Reset Generation*, during his often silly, mostly irreverent but overall astute speech at the Edinburgh Interactive Festival in August. He claimed that introducing the thoughts of the American theorist, dubbed by Foe the father of modern business and management, could bring any project success – even the likes of *Big*

Foe proposed a series of principles that could be used to produce a site that not only offers games for free but becomes the one place for games on the web

Erogenous Zone Academy, his mock proposal for a touch-based game for phones.

More seriously, Foe showed how combining Drucker's approach to design, business and marketing with recent internet-driven innovations could revolutionise the way videogames can be distributed and consumed. First, he proposed a series of principles that he claimed could be used to produce the 'YouTube of games', a site that

not only offers games for free but becomes the one place for games on the web, in the same way that YouTube has become synonymous with internet video.

He said that the display area should be kept small so it could be embedded on blogs. "If you say you can't make great games in a small display area, you're full of hogwash," he pronounced, displaying a picture of a Game Boy Advance. Being able to embed the games on other websites is of paramount importance to getting the network effect, too. "People talk about going viral, I say bacterial," he suggested as a way of explaining the power behind YouTube's technique of advertising itself through its own videos embedded in other people's websites. The site should also welcome all platforms, not just Flash or Java, and let players play immediately, not make them fill in a form first. "Wieners will say things like: 'If it's really so easy then why hasn't someone already done it?'" he acknowledged. "But it's like the guy seeing a Jackson Pollock painting and saying that his three-year-old daughter could do better. Well, that guy's daughter didn't and Pollock did, and that's why it's on the wall."

He also proposed an 'MP3 of games', a



The Edinburgh Interactive Festival is held during the Edinburgh International Festival and consists of an industry conference and a public series of talks, screenings and demos, including a showcase of games entered into the Dare To Be Digital contest

universal game format that he called GamePeg. Comprising a single file that can be played on any platform, from desktop to handheld, it's an attempt to avoid having to locate and download both the game file and the correct emulator for it. "That's a hardcore experience. The real innovation is that each game is one file." The emulator is bundled with the file so the player doesn't have to know about it. "Of course, piracy goes viral too," he admitted. "You're thinking: 'You work for a publisher! Judas! Why would you say this?'"

His answer is that he thinks that, using Drucker's principles, he can make money out of it. The software to make it run on PC should be free, there should be a focus on selling peripherals, and the technology should be licensed as widely as possible. "Sony, Nintendo and Microsoft aren't going to want to have anything to do with GamePeg – at first," he said. "But every consumer electronics manufacturer wants to differentiate their products." In other words, the firms that make set-top boxes and DVD players would want to have their products loaded with GamePeg and eventually, he feels, the format could reach critical mass. And, because each game is one file, the purchasing and DRM should be part of the file. "Do this, and BitTorrent and Kazaa become your Wal-Mart."

Delivered to an audience containing some of the leaders of the British videogame industry, including Nintendo UK general manager David Yarnton, Codemasters CEO Rod Cousins and former SCEE president Chris Deering, Foe's presentation was provocative and entertaining. His keenly but creatively commercial attitude gives videogame marketing a good name.



Viral malaise

Scott Foe talks necromancy and, worse, marketing

Foe criticised the way many marketers attempt to publicise their products by 'going viral': an estate agent's video of a bear dancing on a house might well get sent to every inbox, but it sells the dancing bear, not the house, he said. "You've got to make a spectacle of the product," he pronounced, advising that the publisher of the next WWII FPS shouldn't just get some army general to talk up the game. "I want you to dig up General Patton, reanimate him, build a Pattonstein and have him advise on the game and present it to journalists. Then everyone will be talking about it."



Reset Generation looks complicated, but our review on p101 of this issue and feature in E189 identify a game of subtlety and humour

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Golden lights

Vote for the games you want to grab the gongs at the Golden Joysticks

Competition in the 26th Annual Golden Joystick Awards, in association with Virgin Media, is heating up as October 31 draws ever nearer, with over half a million votes cast thus far. Having rounded off the quarter-century last year, the longest-running gaming awards in the world are moving onwards with, as ever, the emphasis wholly on the public vote.

Naturally, there's never a shortage of opinions between gamers, so it's just as well that the shortlists encompass all demographics. The Nuts All-Nighter Award certainly sets out its stall: the irrepressible *Smash Bros Brawl*, the plastic thrills of *Rock Band* and *Guitar Hero III*, online favourites *Call Of Duty 4*, *Mario Kart Wii*, *Team Fortress 2* and *Enemy Territory: Quake Wars*, Criterion's blistering *Burnout Paradise* and Rockstar's magnificent *Grand Theft Auto IV*.

Online isn't simply about all-nighters, however: the Online Game of the Year category aims to reward social play and co-operation as well as headshots. The gargantuan achievements of *World Of Warcraft* ensure it a continuing presence on the shortlist, but the pretenders to the throne also have their places: *Lord Of The Rings Online*, *Guild Wars*, *Eve Online* and *Age Of Conan*: *Hyborian Adventures* will all be hoping to upstage the grand old man of MMOGs. The frag-happy will doubtless pile in to make their voices heard for the more instant gratification of *Gears Of War*, *Unreal Tournament 3*, *Team Fortress 2* and



Super Smash Bros Brawl and *Super Mario Galaxy* (top) saw Nintendo at the peak of its abilities, squeezing some incredible visuals from its Wii. *Rock Band*, meanwhile, has become the game most likely to surface at any house party – and actually got played

COD4, however, while Konami's *Pro Evolution Soccer 2008* has to be considered a dark horse.

There are also some surprises among the contenders for Publisher of the Year: Nintendo might be the pick of analysts for the obvious financial reasons, but they're not voting here. And against the likes of Activision (*COD4*, *GHIII*), Codemasters (*Grid*, *LOTRO*), EA (*Boom Blox*, *Burnout Paradise*, *Rock Band*) and Rockstar Games (*Grand Theft Auto IV*), it may not be so clear cut.

Those focused on the craft rather than commercial will also be interested in the category for best UK developer, whose nominees have been responsible for shooting shapes to football and cartoon bears: in alphabetical order, the contenders for this award are Bizarre Creations, Codemasters, Creative Assembly, Criterion, Free Radical, Frontier Developments, Lionhead, Rare, Rockstar Leeds, Rockstar North, SCE London Studio, Splash Damage, Sports Interactive, Team 17 and Traveller's Tales.

Voting is still open for the **Edge Most Wanted Award**, for which you can choose your most anticipated game of the next year from a list including the likes of PlatinumGames' *Bayonetta*, Quantic Dream's *Heavy Rain* and Capcom's *Resident Evil 5*. The highest-profile Joystick of all, however, is undoubtedly the Virgin Media Ultimate Game of the Year gong, and its nominees list is, as you'd expect, a heavyweight one. Among the games competing are *BioShock*, *Burnout Paradise*, *Call Of Duty 4*, *GTAIV*, *Halo 3*, *Portal* and *Super Mario Galaxy*.

You can cast your vote in this and all other categories at www.goldenjoystick.com. The results will be streamed live on Friday October 31 at 12.30pm.



Enemy Territory: Quake Wars (top) took former mod team Splash Damage into the mainstream, while *Mass Effect* established an ongoing IP for BioWare

Voting is still open for the Edge Most Wanted Award, for which you can choose your most anticipated game of the next year



BioShock (right) arguably set a new standard for FPS aesthetics and atmosphere, as well as offering one of the most engrossing narratives of the last year. *GTAIV*, on the other hand, introduced social juggling and no small dose of reality into its breathtakingly realised world



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XBOX 360 LIVE

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INCOMING

New games, and updates on games already on the radar

Deathspank

FORMAT: DS PUBLISHER: HOTHEAD GAMES



Three new trailers for Ron Gilbert's long-awaited mix of *Diablo* and *Monkey Island* tell us little, though enough blood flies to cover the screen and the 'Thong Of Justice' gets a double airing

The Maw

FORMAT: 360 PUBLISHER: MICROSOFT



Due on XBLA this year, Twisted Pixel's tale of an astronaut and his blob devoured plenty of attention at last month's Penny Arcade Expo, revealing more of its gene-splicing collaborative puzzles

Darksiders: Wrath Of War

FORMAT: 360, PS3 PUBLISHER: THQ



Your task: to consider your objective with a straight face. The apocalypse has happened prematurely and it's fallen to War, a horseman with a minigun, to find out why. Actually not a comedy

Death Tank

FORMAT: 360 PUBLISHER: MICROSOFT



Once an Easter egg for the Saturn versions of *Exhumed* and *Duke Nukem 3D*, Snowblind Studios' realtime take on *Scorched Earth* blasts on to XBLA, hopefully with ideas as bright as its effects

Carrier Command: Gaea Mission

FORMAT: TBC PUBLISHER: BOHEMIA INTERACTIVE



Whether Black Emerald's remake is even recognisable when it drops anchor in 2010 is the question, Phil and Didi Gibson's *Gaea* novels adding a whole new premise to this 'next-gen rendition'

Red Faction: Guerrilla

FORMAT: 360, PC, PS3 PUBLISHER: THQ



As *Mercenaries 2* brings its world to ruin, Volition smartens up its destruction. Blast escape routes through walls, bring down stairs beneath pursuers, and cripple buildings with chained explosions

GTI Club+

FORMAT: PS3 PUBLISHER: KONAMI



A quick pull of the handbrake and the coin-op hit screeches on to PlayStation Store via Sumo Digital. The vital dashboard readings: 720p, 60fps, 5.1 sound, new cars, modes and custom paint jobs

Overlord II

FORMAT: 360, PC, PS3 PUBLISHER: CODEMASTERS



Leading two fellow *Overlords* into 2009 (*Dark Legend* on Wii and *Minions* on DS), the sequel sees the tyrant and his troublemakers sack (on wolfback, no less) an entire 'Roman-inspired' empire

Pipemania

FORMAT: DS, PC, PS2, PSP PUBLISHER: EMPIRE



After a successful tour of *BioShock*, Empire's gunk-puzzler plumbs greater depths as a rejuvenated kids' game, promising 70 levels, new mechanics, restyled graphics, and a character-driven story

INTERNET GAME OF THE MONTH

Iji

www.remar.se/daniel/iji.php

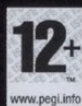
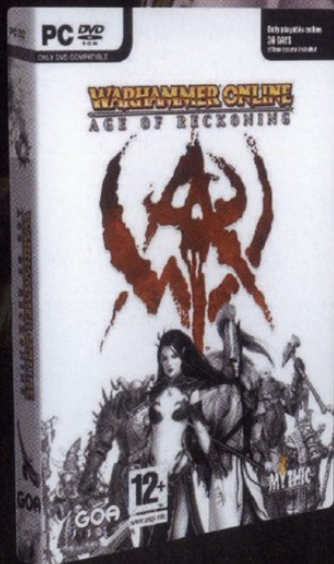
The level of polish and depth that freeware games are providing almost as standard these days is nothing short of breathtaking – and *Iji* is another fine example. A scrolling platformer in the vein of *Metroid*, *Iji* is about both exploration and shooting nasty aliens: you play the eponymous heroine as she tries to work out what's happened to the complex in which she wakes, and who is pulling the strings.

There are many, many things to find in *Iji* and a lot of variation in locations. Levels are initially linear by necessity,

but quickly blossom into a labyrinth of corridors that reward powered-up backtracking and an observant eye with all the usual weapons – all to honour its inspiration admirably – and diaries and logs fill in pieces of the ongoing puzzle.

The odd frustration, such as only being able to shoot when standing upright, is subsumed in the quality of the whole production – the soundtrack, the *Another World*-style visuals and, even, animation, and the piecemeal delivery of its well-written story.

War is coming



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Industry

FOCUS



The unstoppable *Guitar Hero* bandwagon rolls on, with no new announcements but a nice line in audience participation

In association with Screen Digest

Good times and new faces at Leipzig

Piers Harding-Rolls gives an analyst's perspective on some of the major announcements at the recent Leipzig Games Convention

The Leipzig Games Convention after E3 was like a breath of fresh air. I realise these two events are now vastly different in scale and scope, but the content diversity on offer at Leipzig washed away many of the memories of an E3 dominated by the rather repetitive talk of the success of music games *Guitar Hero* and *Rock Band*. While E3 felt

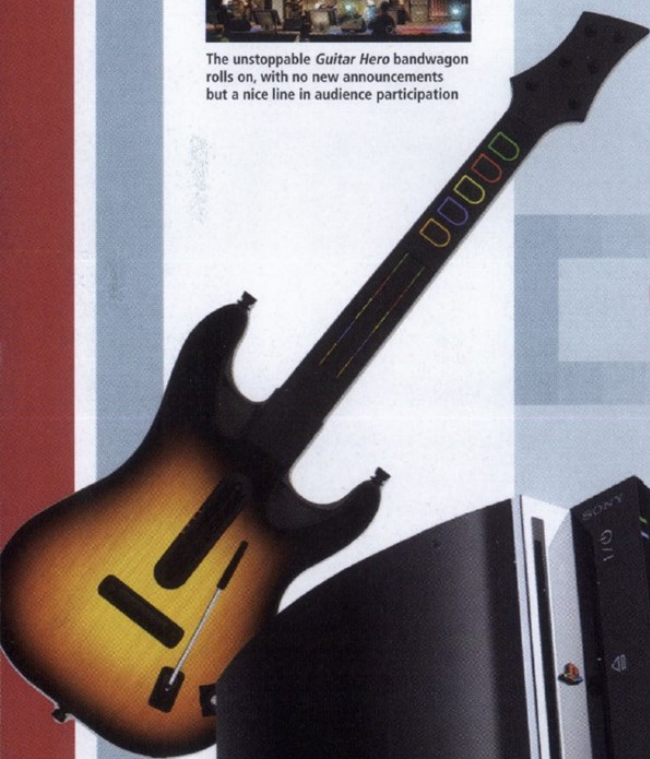
and geographical regions, and the fact that these companies were rubbing shoulders with the traditional western publishers we associate so closely with the retail end of the games business. This type of environment alerts the attendee to the potential for mainstream games to reach beyond their traditional confines to a landscape where content is more commonly networked, community-driven or even perhaps played across multiple platforms. Indeed, there were many young online games companies in attendance that have already highlighted the potential of new business models, content strategies and community-based services to the industry, and these new pretenders offer a fresh face. Leipzig also reminded us of the diversity of the European consumer and in particular the Germans' penchant for online PC games.

At E3, SCEE tantalised attendees with a promise of multiple revelations, both local and global, at Leipzig. This was delivered to an extent, although our pre-conference intelligence suggested that the PSP 3000 would be a more substantial upgrade

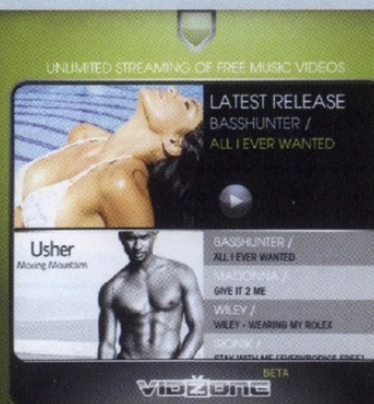
The Convention was an event full of business energy and excitement that managed to capture the essence of an industry bristling with new ideas

somewhat stale, albeit punctuated by some pretty exciting press conferences from Microsoft and Sony, the Convention was an event full of business energy and excitement that managed to capture the essence of an industry bristling with new ideas and opportunities.

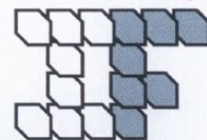
Much of this energy came from the mix of companies attending from different games sectors



PLAYSTATION 3

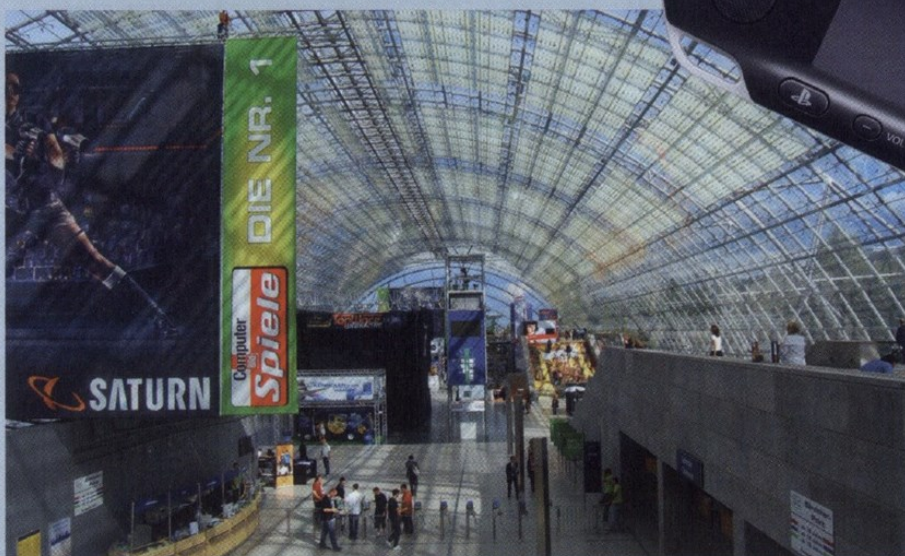


PLAYSTATION 3
VitaZone is coming early 2009



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than the device that was eventually revealed. Perhaps the biggest announcement from a non-gaming perspective was the VidZone service (below left), to launch in Q1 2009 across 23 PAL territories. The service will be available on PS3 and will offer on-demand music videos, allowing for playlists and remote access via PSP. The service will be ad-supported with spots sold by third parties and free to consumers.

It will be of interest to see how this experiment turns out. The momentum behind 'free' music services is clearly growing on other platforms, notably PC. However, standalone ad-supported music services are often unsustainable under the current combination of high music royalty rates and low ad-revenue associated with music, with a number of services already closing due to financial pressures. This move, therefore, is less about revenue for SCEE and more about the ability to deliver a ready-made aggregated solution to the European consumer that can help promote the PS3 as a multimedia platform, while the company sorts out its premium service.

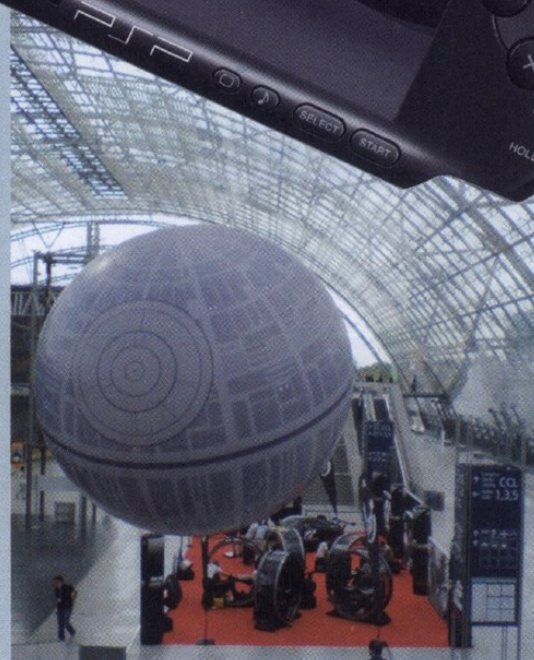
Worth mentioning as well is SCEE's decision to experiment with a PS3 bundle that includes €70 of downloadable content and a larger hard drive. While all three console companies are pressing ahead with digital distribution strategies, Sony's experimentation with download-to-own strategies for premium titles and this newest offering suggest the company has entered a more aggressive stage



Despite suffering a Death Star attack (that's no balloon, right), Leipzig was home to playable demos of many games, with Sony's (above) being by far the best showing. *LittleBigPlanet* was totally swamped

of testing the market to prompt a swifter transition away from physical retail sales. While it will take many years for there to be a significant challenge to physical distribution channels from these sources, Sony's eagerness to test the market bodes well for the company's competitive positioning in the coming years.

There was, however, one rather significant industry lynchpin missing from Leipzig – Nintendo. While the company turned on the style at last year's event, it decided against attending in 2008, citing a decision to engage with consumers through smaller, local events instead. With the company again sidestepping the Tokyo Game Show, this conference policy is more evidence that Nintendo's business strategy path is increasingly diverged from that of the other platform holders.





Tales of Lucre

Game producer Brick Bardo takes a look at how to make instant progress – for a price



In the first half of August, the weekly sales of Xbox 360 in Japan were greater than PlayStation 3: 28,116 as against 10,705. People who are familiar with the Japanese market will probably be united in thinking the same thing: 'What?'

Of the three home videogame platforms

available in Japan, Wii rules the roost, with more than six million units installed. Far behind, you have PS3 and Xbox 360, hovering around something more like 600,000. Early in September there was a price cut of the 'older' Xbox 360 models in Japan, which means that the entry-level Arcade unit will be cheaper than Wii. Nintendo and Sony have no plans to lower the price of their systems, so I'm

really interested in how this is going to affect the market before the end of the year. But rather than taking a detailed and possibly quite boring look at Xbox 360's huge jump forward in terms of its hardware sales, let's talk about the game that caused it all, *Tales Of Vesperia*.

I once had a crazy idea to make an RPG you could enjoy without playing too much. You could hire a person who would level your characters for you. But this was just a joke, the dream of someone who didn't know what gaming is

In terms of visuals and content, here is an RPG that is not only very Japanese but also very well crafted. The *Tales* series has already sold ten million copies, so among JRPGs it's a popular franchise with quite a few fans. Personally, I loved the very first game on Super Famicom, *Tales Of Phantasia*, but I never felt that the others quite recaptured its magic.

Anyway, there is some controversy surrounding this game regarding the downloads available for it. I'm not talking about new maps, new missions or special items – you find these kinds of additional content in most games. But with *Vesperia* there is something new: you can buy a level-up!

Just after starting the game you can pay ¥300 (£1.60) to level your party members by five levels, or ¥450 (£2.40) to really push the boat out and jump ten levels. Pay another ¥450 and your bank account grows by 30,000G. And there are all sorts of useful items for the low price of ¥100 (53p).

I once had a crazy idea to make an RPG you could enjoy without playing too much. You could



Tales Of Vesperia has been praised for its anime-style graphics and realtime combat system. It sold 70,000 copies on its first day of release in Japan, and another 10,000 as a console bundle. Its launch is credited as the cause of Xbox 360 selling out in the region

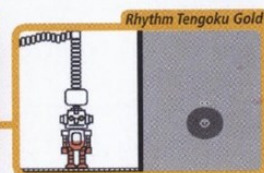
hire another person who would level your characters for you. But this was just a kind of joke that ran around in my head: the more I thought about it, the more I realised it was the dream of someone who didn't know what gaming is. Can you imagine a singleplayer game that actually needed gold farmers? Well, here we have people in the industry doing the same thing to profit from their game.

There are reasons behind it, of course: *Tales Of Vesperia*, despite being part of a recognised franchise in Japan, is exclusively on 360, a 'minor' platform. So it is safe to say retail sales won't be that huge. Perhaps this DLC strategy is some kind of last resort? One characteristic of RPGs is a very long play time, so maybe the DLC is aimed at all those people who don't have the time to play an RPG like they did in the past? Of course, it is possible to enjoy the game without buying any

level-ups, items or gold online, just like any standard RPG. I guess if questioned on the DLC service, Bandai Namco would say just that.

DLC is becoming a standard component of any game today, but looking at Bandai Namco's move I feel that the RPG's 'P' is beginning to stand for 'paying', rather than 'playing.' If this continues to escalate, why don't companies just let us unlock the end cutscene directly for a few yen? If many more games incorporate this kind of DLC and it becomes any kind of standard in our industry, then I wonder whether there would be much reason left to keep playing.

Tales Of Vesperia, incidentally, is by no means a bad game – I'm only part way in, and enjoying it, and I'm sure its fanbase will too. But no, I haven't been tempted to buy my progress. Am I the only one feeling how stupid this incorporation of DLC is? It has to end here.



Weekly Famitsu (Enterbrain) Japanese sales: August 18–24

Game/weekly sales/lifetime sales
Winning Eleven 2008 Club Championship (Konami, PS2): 80,730 (NE)
Rhythm Tengoku Gold (Nintendo, DS): 55,487 (557,088)
Inazuma Eleven (Level-5, DS): 41,458 (NE)
Phantasy Star Portable (Sega, PSP): 35,486 (545,242)
Yume no Ukihashi (Koei, DS): 29,156 (NE)
Wii Fit (Nintendo, Wii): 25,542 (2,489,292)
Dragon Quest V (Square Enix, DS): 25,152 (1,102,067)
Sigma Harmonics (Square Enix, DS): 24,619 (NE)
Daigasso! Band Brothers DX (Nintendo, DS): 16,786 (286,221)
Mario Kart Wii (Nintendo, Wii): 14,924 (1,678,151)



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Fable II



This is always the worst part with Lionhead's games: you've seen the interviews, watched the videos, and now you just want to play it to see if the damn thing delivers. 360, MICROSOFT

Bionic Commando



Another session with Capcom's reinvention reveals the elegance of its dynamic 3D swinging – and the impact of its explosions. It's all shaping up surprisingly well. WII, CAPCOM

SingStar Disney



'Casual gaming' indeed. You don't know what hardcore is until you've gone mic to mic with Edge's king of the swingers. We'll introduce you to a whole new world of pain. PS2, SCEE

Dr Strangeluck

Or how we learned to stop quickloading and love failure



As games experiment with greater freedom of choice, how can they go about making the consequences of those decisions profound and permanent? More importantly, can they stay a finger as it hovers over the quickload key?

As the debate over save structures continues on countless internet sites, developers are quietly walking away from the concept of the save as a fallback position from failure. Some have been walking away from the concept of failure altogether. The new *Prince Of Persia* aims to never show the player a death screen – your AI companion simply whisks you safety. Similarly, *Fable 2* finds ways to avoid killing the player, exchanging a chunk of XP for a last-second revival, and attempts to turn failure elsewhere into a viable alternative: fumble an attempt to impress a girl and she'll think you're funny rather than incompetent.

These solutions are geared towards making the player content with the result of their actions, regardless of their original intent. But is it possible to have the player accept distinctly unhappy consequences too? Last issue we looked at *Heavy Rain* – a game that promises to do just that. Even if your character finds herself stuffed by a lunatic taxidermist the story continues, no less dramatically interesting because of the death – perhaps more so, in fact.

As we were playing *Far Cry 2* this month, we found ourselves similarly forced to accept the cruelties of happenstance – one of our buddies hit the dirt and, lacking a life-giving syrette, we faced the decision of whether to leave her to a slow death in the desert or help her shuffle off her mortal coil with a bullet in the teeth. We chose the latter. It's what friends are for.

Far Cry 2 makes this bearable only by making the route back the harder one – at least in our quicksave-less 360 preview code. The world is so instantly hostile to your presence that picking up a mission is a mission in itself, and retiring a buddy is often easier, in strictly practical terms, than reloading to the last safehouse. Their death becomes a consequence you accept before pressing on, your cumulative actions telling a story that is more brutally apt, given its war-torn setting, than if everything were to go your way. Oddly, the PC version of the game includes the ability to save anywhere – it will be an interesting to see if PC gamers find it less affecting, or whether console gamers will end up resenting such horrific decisions.

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DS

FORMAT: PC
PUBLISHER: SEGA
DEVELOPER: CREATIVE ASSEMBLY
ORIGIN: UK
RELEASE: FEBRUARY 6

Empire: Total War

Creative Assembly shows Leipzig
the sharp end of the Enlightenment



So as not to dizzy new players with its scale, *Empire* offers a preset story mode that will steadily introduce the game's many concepts. Based on the American War of Independence, you'll see the revolution through from its beginnings at Jamestown

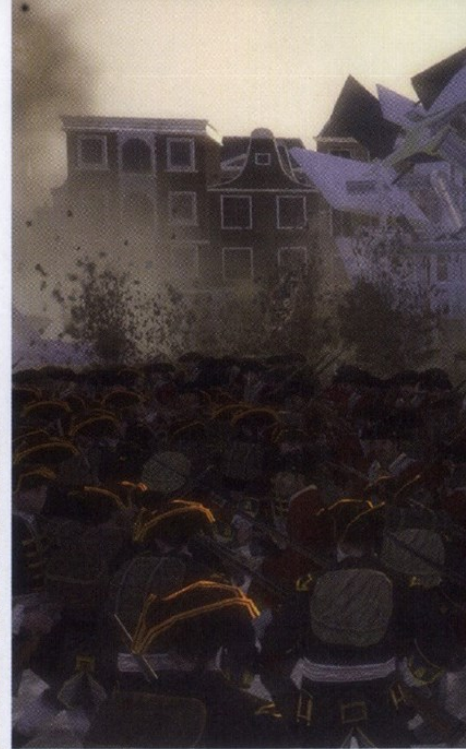


Military history buffs though they are, *Total War's* UK-based developers clearly know a thing or two about diplomacy as well. At our demonstration during Leipzig's Games Convention they politely elect to play as the Prussian forces wresting back control of an 18th century recreation of the town from the British. And, leaving it strewn with red-coated carcasses, the team can claim to have conquered Leipzig in more ways than one.

While *Empire* is still recognisably a

Total War game, bundling the minutiae of realtime battle – the split-second decisions to fix bayonets or garrison units – into the macroscopic view of international diplomacy, trade and scientific progress, its scale and depth is quite beyond that of its predecessors, and pretty much any other strategy game you care to name.

Though the addition of naval combat is perhaps *Empire's* most obvious hook, today we are here to see how land combat works as *Total War* marches into the age of



There is no abstraction regarding the numbers of your troops or sailors. Though you don't micromanage, every swarthy sea dog has his own particular role to perform

gunpowder and artillery. Not a studio to skimp on detail, Creative Assembly claims to be recreating the entire 18th century world. The town of Leipzig isn't just built for this demonstration – it's apparently in there with every other major town, constructed from a mixture of topographical satellite data and historical record. And, as the British forces move out of Leipzig to meet the Prussian troops, it's clear that Creative Assembly isn't just thinking of the big picture. Men vault over a low wall, dash across a yellow field and hunker down behind a hedgerow; though models are reused, they move as a unit made up of individuals – animations are varied and desynchronised to make the flow of troops appear naturalistic. When engaged in combat, several will break off to fight duels – zoomed in, these motion-captured sequences are cinematic enough, but when the camera pans out, they help to break up the mass into a swarm of individual bodies. With the potential for up to 10,000 units on screen, it's fairly important that they don't all appear to be doing the exact same thing.

Every musket shot is modelled, we are told – the use of cover here isn't just a damage modifier, but an actual impediment to deadly, physics-enabled lead. The dynamic weather also has some significance here – cannonballs bounce off hard ground, and bury themselves into wet soil; movement is trickier through mud and the damp will cause muskets to misfire. This is of no small importance to strategy in the larger campaign – since the weather is seasonal and dependent on geography, it may be prudent to delay the invasion of India until after the monsoon.



The proliferation of gunpowder during the 18th century saw the reduced importance of cavalry as the backbone of an army – players used to the tactics of previous *Total War* games may be in for a shock when a smartly deployed fougasse fills the sky with horsemeat puree



With each cannon shot rendered as a physical object, capable of deflecting or bouncing, you now have to be a little more careful of friendly fire – particularly at sea, where enemies will try to exploit conflicted lines of fire



The full list of playable nations is yet to be divulged, although there will be 12 to pick from, and another 38 who you will encounter as enemies. Famous figures will also appear, if the conditions are appropriate – Napoleon won't rise to power if France is annihilated



While we are taking all of this information in, associate producer Mark Sutherns has been busily decimating the British cavalry charge with a fougasse – an 18th century minefield of sorts – before fending off a bayonet attack by their infantry. The British retreat into Leipzig, but they aren't fleeing. It's a tactical withdrawal, leaving their commander to organise a rear-guard action as they take up firing positions in the buildings, moving the majority of their army into the narrow streets on the far side of town. It's a smart move – the Prussians now have to decide between an artillery bombardment of the town, which would more or less void their reason for capturing it, or fixing bayonets and fighting hand-to-hand in the streets while being pummelled by musket shot from the garrisoned British. And the Prussians wouldn't be able to fire back: as communications manager Kieran Brigden explains – in one of several casually introduced examples of historical detail we

are too ignorant to appreciate – at this moment in history, the socket bayonet had yet to be invented, meaning that affixing the blade was a matter of plugging it in to the barrel itself. Sutherns opts for a mixture of the two strategies, smashing some of the outlying buildings with cannon fire before heading into the town centre. Brutal combat

The Prussians now have to decide between an artillery bombardment of the town which would more or less void their reason for capturing it, or fixing bayonets

breaks out, and the AI outflanks the Prussian troops. Momentarily the situation appears disastrous, but Sutherns brings in reinforcements to sandwich the column of British troops harrying the Prussian flank. Almost instantly, and without a great loss of troops, the British elect to flee – again, not a decision made out of panic, but cunning. At all times the AI is aware of the importance of

the battle in the overall campaign – here, it's ambition is simply to hamper Prussian progress and maximise enemy casualties with as little risk as possible. As soon as the day appears lost, they make the decision to live to fight another day, and retreat post-haste.

How such a battle ties in to the larger campaign remains to be seen, but with

several non-military routes to victory available, *Empire's* depiction of diplomacy and trade promises to be no less elaborate than its recreation of the battlefield. As the recent spate of RTS announcements sees the genre struggling to slim down so it can fit on to consoles, it's heartening to see Creative Assembly take on something so uncompromisingly ambitious.



Sea combat, recently demonstrated at E3, is just as comprehensively realised as the land battles that have been the *Total War* series' staple and is every bit the Hornblower fantasy. Waves swell and crash around vessels as they exchange volleys of cannon fire, each shot ripping its own hole through sails, masts and hulls. You can even choose to board your enemy's ship, swashbuckle its crew into submission and incorporate the vessel into your own fleet. Of course, they may choose to scuttle the ship and swim for it – a strategy for which the sharks will be very grateful.

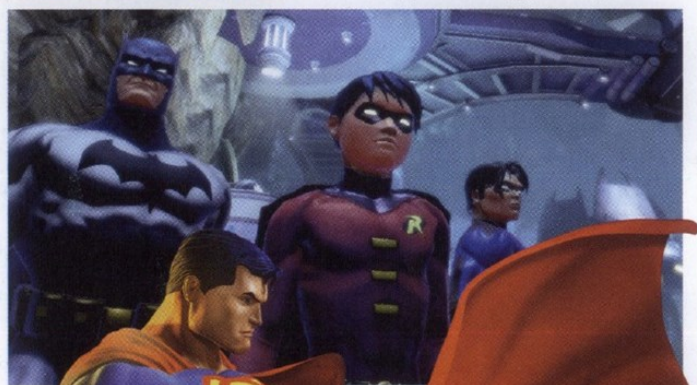
FORMAT: PC, PS3
PUBLISHER: SOE
DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE (SOE AUSTIN)
ORIGIN: US
RELEASE: TBA
PREVIOUSLY IN: E191

DC Universe Online

Metropolis gets a rubble makeover as SOE Austin invites us back into the DC Universe



Character levelling is taken care of by an experience bar at the bottom of the screen. Even after a few hours of play, the promise of moment-to-moment action and longer-term levelling goals is easy to see



SOE Austin might just have all its bases covered. After all, the chances are that you either like Superman, or you wouldn't mind hitting him over the head with a bus. So long as you're content not to actually be the Man of Steel, then *DC Universe Online* will probably have something to delight you with.

If there were any doubts remaining about SOE's commitment to the DC licence in its MMO, you need look no further than the hidden details. The name of the build Austin took on tour to San Diego's Comic-Con and SOE's annual Fan Faire in Las Vegas is Kandor, a reference to the Kryptonian city Superman kept inside a bottle.

There's a danger to this level of fan service. If you're unable to tell Granny Goodness from Mister Mxyzptlk, this complex universe of tights and capes may be no less intimidating than the world of Draenei and Blood Elves. But, having learned from *Star Wars Galaxies*, SOE Austin is keen to stress that the more familiar superfaces will be visible from an early stage, and a chance to play around with the Kandor build suggests that there are plenty of reasons to keep a close eye on *DCUO*.

The last time we visited Metropolis, it was an empty playground, flooded with golden light, art deco stylings and female characters without hair. A few months down the line, and the hair has finally made an appearance, as have particle effects and pedestrians. This is a more reactive world: cars explode as you

Cars explode as you launch them down the street, and speed-running temporarily sets sidewalks on fire, Back To The Future style, as you sprint in and out of battles



launch them down the street, and speed-running (which no longer makes everyone seasick) temporarily sets sidewalks on fire, Back To The Future style, as you sprint in and out of battles.

Creative director **Chris Cao** says that the development team wanted to tackle some of the more difficult aspects of running an MMO first, and that's why rather than present the first public preview audiences

with a heavily controlled instanced dungeon, or a brief look at character-creation screens, they instead opted to show what a live event might look like.

And the results are extremely promising. Using a surprisingly large area of downtown Metropolis (one of several shared locations in the final game), the stage is set for an invasion from Brainiac, a Superman foe, who has infected ordinary citizens, turning them into zombies. Playing as a hero, we are tasked with knocking out the infected (there's no death in *DCUO*), and then removing Brainiac's nanotechnology before they get back up again, by means of a sweaty-fingered QTE.

The pace is ferocious, with the infected attacking en masse, and provides a showcase

Cao remains tight-lipped on the role that superheroes' secret identities will play in the game, but has revealed it's intrinsically linked into the item crafting system



KOs replace death, offering the opportunity to respawn away from danger, or get up after a penalty period. Time spent out of action can mean a failed objective, however

for teamwork as well as the wide range of direct and area attacks. Normal attacks are mapped to the face buttons, and specials, which take longer to recharge, are activated by face buttons and R2.

Even though Cao is at pains to make it clear that this kind of scenario is 'base level content,' it is still a confident and multi-staged event, with the influx of infected citizens giving way to Brainiac's own troopers and, finally, a chance to fight alongside Superman or Supergirl against some of DC's iconic bad guys. When you take into account that events like this will have to play out with victory scenarios for both the hero and villain factions, the balancing act the development team faces seems particularly daunting.

While animations are noticeably tighter and the combat has a much chunkier sense of connection this time around, what marks this out as particularly engaging is the focus on physics. Enemies can be blasted with lasers, freeze rays, electrical energy, or myriad other loadouts, but can just as easily be turned into a block of ice or a sphere of light, which can then be picked up and thrown into the distance, or punted into another foe. The same is true for cars, trucks and even lampposts, and although other games have featured this kind of experience, there's something peculiarly satisfying about flattening the Man of Steel himself with a park bench.



"It's the kind of thing we could do on the fly," says Cao. "It's not a dungeon or an instance by any means, but if you complete it successfully, you may get a piece of information or an item which takes you closer to unlocking a raid or a dungeon."

With the game's narrative unfolding in such a tantalisingly freeform manner, Cao's team looks well on its way to creating a unique entry to the online landscape. The marketing may be led by the roster of famous names, but *DCUO*'s greatest achievement may be in bringing physics, speed and knockabout enjoyment to MMOGs. And, so far, there isn't a pelt-collecting quest in sight.

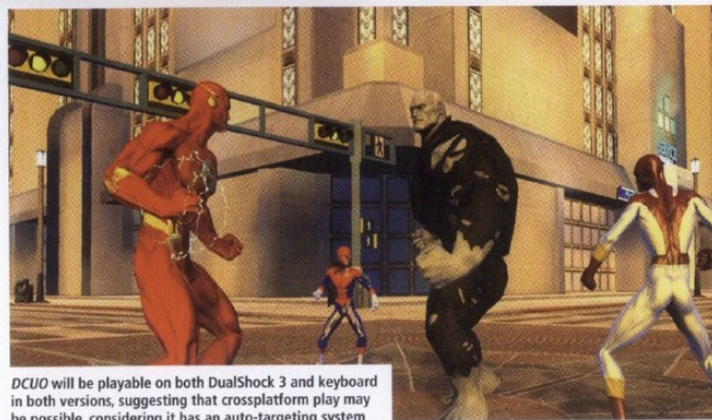


Balance of power

One of the key choices in character creation is mobility, with flight, super-speed and acrobatics all available. Already, it's a selection which allows you to create any of DC's existing heroes, but if it sounds like a balancing nightmare given the game's large, vertical environments, the team is already doing a good job of making sure everyone can compete on a level playing field. Flyers may be able to flap to the top of skyscrapers, but speedsters will have no trouble scaling buildings in roughly the same amount of time, while acrobats can find ways to leap anywhere.



"Super-speed tends to appeal to racing game players," says Cao, intriguingly. "People who like to pick a line and follow it." But you'll have to be decisive – a brief pause halfway up a building sees you falling. Wile E Coyote style, straight back down again



DCUO will be playable on both DualShock 3 and keyboard in both versions, suggesting that crossplatform play may be possible, considering it has an auto-targeting system



Resistance 2

Appearing in poor shape at Leipzig, we hope that Resistance isn't useless

FORMAT: PS3
PUBLISHER: SONY
DEVELOPER: INSOMNIAC
ORIGIN: US
RELEASE: NOVEMBER 4
PREVIOUSLY IN: E187

With the sequel to *Resistance: Fall Of Man*, Insomniac has left behind the sepia tones of second-rate British urbanity, skipped across the Atlantic by way of Iceland, and left the player battling bigger and more numerous foes across the protagonist's home country. We were able to dip into a brief section set in the back alleys of an American city, while another hands-off demonstration depicted a vast behemoth, not dissimilar to Cloverfield's sky-scraping beast, laying waste to downtown Chicago.

The playable section, entitled Grims' Alley, sees the player and a small squad of allies face off against a vast swarm of gangly, speedy mutants – a scene that, minus the elongated fangs and oddly placed eyes of your enemies, could easily be from any film of the 'fast zombie' genre. While it's designed to showcase this new creature, as a representative snapshot of the game as a whole it's something of a worrying choice. The sequence is a turkey shoot: despite the speed of your foes, they present no threat of over-running or outflanking you, making their attack largely devoid of tension. With annoyingly transparent AI behaviour, the few mutants making it through your wall of bullets ignore CPU-controlled squadmates to zero in on the player.

For something being shown to the public as well as press so shortly before release, it is in a surprisingly unpolished state. Enemy animations fail to segue without notable awkwardness between running, attacking and dying. The streets and buildings of *Resistance 2* well evoke a deserted, depression-era America, but the details of this picture – the washing lines, the broken masonry and papery detritus floating in the



Insomniac certainly makes an attempt at wowing the player with scale – several of the enemies tower above you. Size isn't everything, however: it remains unclear how you will actually go about overcoming these gigantic critters

wind – all too often fade into the overwhelmingly grim palette of browns and greys. Despite the best efforts of the environment artists, the contrivances of level design remain undisguised, and your movement through the city feels constricted. Motion and aiming lacks the deft control of its PS3 shooter sibling, *Killzone 2* (see facing page) – which, by contrast, seems to be in supremely sound form.

Though the brief time with a controller in our hands is underwhelming, hands-off demonstrations of the game held elsewhere look much more flattering, showing off new weapons like the sawblade-spitting Splicer, and detailing Insomniac's plans for multiplayer. With *Resistance 2* and *Killzone 2*, Sony is swinging for the lantern jaw of Xbox Live – and, in this respect, both games seem

to be pretty heavy hitters, with their own websites, player advancement and community features. *Resistance 2*'s 60-player battles have some intriguing ideas about how to tie XP into the second-to-second gameplay (see 'Buff the mutant slayer') and an eightplayer co-op campaign, separate to the singleplayer mode, will presumably look pretty good when number-crunching the features list with that of *Gears Of War 2*. Such a robust online offering alone confirms that *Resistance 2* isn't without promise and, despite its shaky showing, it's difficult to make dire pronouncements on the game's health given the competence of its predecessor. We just hope that taking the gunplay across the pond has expanded Insomniac's ambition rather than blurred it.



Buff the mutant slayer

While *Call Of Duty 4*'s perks tied permanent play advantages to your XP level, *Resistance 2* arrives at a more balanced solution, known as the Berserk system, offering you temporary power-ups as you advance up the ranks. Hit a certain amount of XP during a given match and you have the chance to activate one of several boosts, making you faster or more powerful for a limited amount of time. Other powers imbue you with the ability to see enemies' locations through walls, or to temporarily increase the rate at which your teammates gain XP, allowing them to reach their Berserk level quicker for co-ordinated super-powered attacks.



As in *Battlefield: Bad Company*, you can allocate squads in multiplayer, creating a separate voice channel and allowing you to spawn close to them when you die. It's quickly done through a few button presses while in-game, allowing you to assemble units on the fly to pursue different tactics



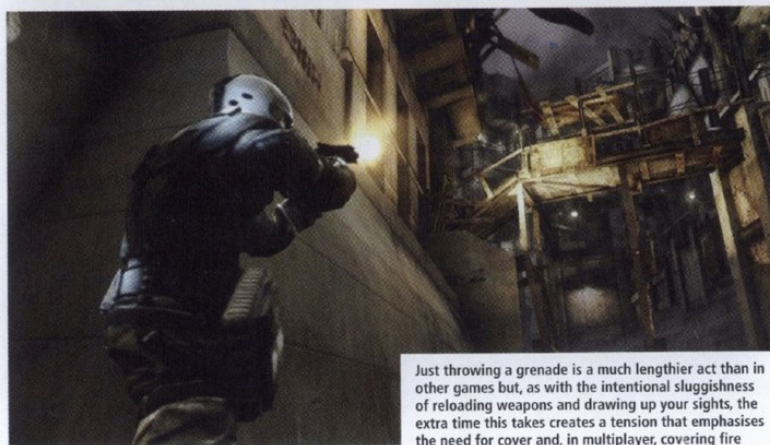
Killzone 2

We pay a visit to the Grey Marines on Planet Brown

It's not ugly so much as bleakly unadventurous: *Killzone 2*'s world is an elision of space marine cliché and desaturated World War II grit, lacking *Halo*'s flamboyance, *Gears Of War*'s steroidal absurdity or *Call Of Duty*'s moral consternation. But if *Killzone 2*'s setting and aesthetic initially seems like something only its mother could love, then actually playing it throws up quite a different point of view.

Somehow, the lens through which Guerrilla permits you to view this fascist-flavoured world of crumbling concrete performs a spectacularly transformative act. The subtle combination of exactly realised visual effects – grainy filters and depth-of-field blurring – along with the sense of weight and momentum suggested by your lumbering movement, roots you firmly in this world. Suddenly a greying, bullet-scarred warehouse, even one scattered with the hoary tradition of explosive barrels, is rendered fresh. From the trailers, *Killzone 2* may seem like a muesli made of other games' offcuts, but it feels quite another thing entirely: solid, heavy, tactile. Your movements – building up to a sprint, drawing a bead on an enemy, switching a weapon or tossing a grenade – are all paced to create a sense of heft and tension.

The sequence we play is an unremarkable succession of tightly controlled urban battles, moving from narrow streets into warehouses and across gantries. There are the staple set-pieces whose over-familiarity voids any



Just throwing a grenade is a much lengthier act than in other games but, as with the intentional sluggishness of reloading weapons and drawing up your sights, the extra time this takes creates a tension that emphasises the need for cover and, in multiplayer, covering fire

importance the game attempts to place upon them – protecting a colleague as he tries to open a door; fending off an ambush upon a slow moving caravan; racing to protect survivors of a downed troop transport. Nonetheless, from moment to moment, the palpable chunkiness of the environments and the tense, meaty combat keeps the grips of our DualShock sweaty. We see and do little in the way of flanking – the environments rarely seem to allow it, although use of cover is vital. Once, we spot a Helghan soldier retreat from his sniping position when under heavy fire, but, most of the time, enemies exhibit little discretion.

It raises something of a question over the AI's competence in online play, where developers say bots will use all the tactics and tools a real player would. This isn't a matter dispelled during our multiplayer session, which sees the Dutch dev team fill out the empty spaces. What is clear is that Guerrilla has built a truly formidable

multiplayer experience – even when considered alongside the offering of other platforms. Structurally, it borrows from the best, with customisation options, ranking, matchmaking and more (see 'Halo, old buddy') while adding its own ideas: unlocking new game modes of increasing complexity as you play more, and introducing a gametype which randomly gives out varying objectives in succession, keeping players wary of the need to suddenly change tactics.

Our time with the multiplayer is too short to develop an appreciation for the balance of the six classes, let alone the ability to mix and match their various attributes. Nonetheless, we leave believing that underneath *Killzone 2*'s po-faced showdown between gung-ho marines and space Nazis there is a deftly crafted shooter, expertly employing visual effects to conjure a world that is really tangible – a much weightier affair than its tawdry premise would suggest.

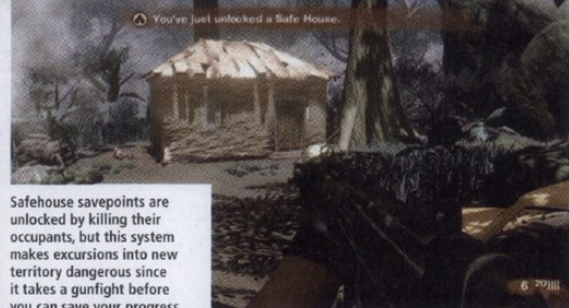
FORMAT: PS3
PUBLISHER: SCE
DEVELOPER: GUERRILLA GAMES
ORIGIN: THE NETHERLANDS
RELEASE: FEBRUARY
PREVIOUSLY IN: £190

Halo, old buddy

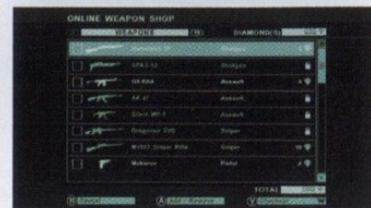
Naysayers regarding *Halo*'s accolades for innovation should start tenderising their hats for easy consumption now. That game's peripheral features and community support are clearly getting recognition, as evidenced by *Killzone 2*'s emulation of them. As with Bungie.net's extensive community pages, stats are automatically tracked at Killzone.com, where players can see their progress as well as setting up clan homepages and organising matches.



Killzone 2 employs a new trick for the motion-sensitive PS3 pad – turning a valve has you clamping it by depressing the triggers, rotating the pad as you would a wheel, then releasing, moving back, clamping and turning again



Safehouse savepoints are unlocked by killing their occupants, but this system makes excursions into new territory dangerous since it takes a gunfight before you can save your progress



Your first weapons are old and dirty – the RPG has a habit of depositing its fizzing payload on the ground, and your automatic rifle and handgun jam continually

Far Cry 2

The mosquitoes close in as we tour Ubisoft Montreal's Africa

FORMAT: 360, PC, PS3
PUBLISHER: UBISOFT
DEVELOPER: UBISOFT MONTREAL
ORIGIN: CANADA
RELEASE: AUTUMN
PREVIOUSLY IN: E181, E185, E191

Our first unhurried play experience with *Far Cry 2* starts where most games should: at its beginning. A jeep ride, in fact, from the airport to Pala, the central town of the war-torn central African country in which it's set, past fleeing refugees, a raging savannah bush fire and through a checkpoint. The malaria attack hits just as we arrive – the screen blurs, pulses and blacks out, and the next thing we see is The Jackal in our room. He knows he's our assassination target, but as far as he's concerned we've already failed: he decides who lives and dies in this country.

The prelude is effective scene setting for a gameworld that feels as dense, dirty and sweaty as its developers have been promising. Environments are animated by the constant movement of shadows thrown by swaying trees, the soundscape is rich with birdcalls, the buzz of insects, voices on radios and conversations among NPCs, the light is subtly toned according to the time of day and terrain – smouldering savannah reds, mottled jungle greens, bleached yellow desert. Details abound, too – burned-out cars, rotting shacks, torn posters, rusting cans, and bites pocked into your forearms.

It takes time to understand *Far Cry 2*'s



The map builder is easy to use, fully featured and adaptable, and surely the finest FPS level editor yet on a console, all with the ability to almost instantly drop into it to play. It also includes rules for multiplayer



The fact that you can still move around when you access the in-game map is invaluable. The GPS unit flashes green when you're near to hidden caches of diamonds, *Far Cry 2*'s currency and one of its collectibles

flow, though. The prescriptive tutorial is intrusive, demanding that you press the buttons as it explains their uses, when all you want to do is run out into the world. Conversations with NPCs must also be carried out at the game's leisure, their speeches difficult to discern against their incidental chatter, sometimes requiring the press of the 'interact' button, sometimes triggered by your proximity. It successfully enforces the sensation of being foreign and unwanted, a spare wheel in a country falling to pieces, but it's a tough introduction to a game. And then, tutorial complete and with some anti-malarial tablets in your pocket, which quell your symptoms enough that you can sprint for more than a few seconds at a time, you're left with the aim of hunting The Jackal and the suggestion to start with a mission from one of the warring factions.

The country is hostile indeed. Its roads, which you can traverse with a range of vehicles, are dotted with outposts manned by aggressive mercenaries. Before long, the game becomes a series of tense journeys between icons and objectives on the map. Once unlocked, by killing their occupants, safehouses allow you to save (though the PC version also supports quicksaves) and advance time. Guard posts are marked with the supply they hold – health or ammo –

once scouted with your eyeglass. For a game with such a natural visual style, such naked game mechanics can feel somewhat jarring.

The gunplay in the 360 version we tested is entertaining, but Ubisoft acknowledges that the enemy AI is unfinished, betraying terrible driving skills and teamwork as well as a lack of self-preservation. It's still easy to die – health recharges to an extent, and your stock of fully-restorative syrettes is limited. If you have a mortal wound you'll need to pull the bullet out with pliers. Get taken down, and there's a chance that one of your AI buddies will come and drag you to safety, but if they're killed they're killed for good, rendering each encounter meaningful through the weight of its consequences.

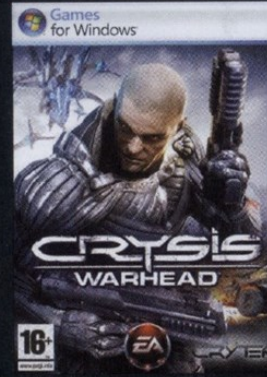
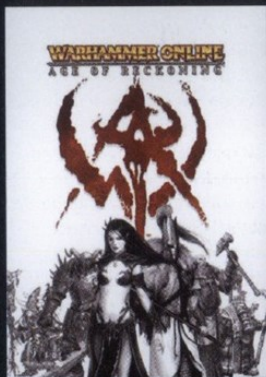
Overall, our first hours with a nearly final *Far Cry 2* are resoundingly compelling, but, without a feel for the way the story plays out, the play mechanics develop and the extent of the world resolves itself, it's hard to make any real judgment. One thing's for sure: we want more.

World war

Just as *Assassin's Creed*, also produced by Ubisoft Montreal, adopted an eclectic approach to the nationality of those populating its virtual world, so too does *Far Cry 2*. Careful to avoid a media firestorm for setting entertaining violence among a civilian African populace, the team has entirely evacuated it. In its place are mercenaries of all creeds and colours, along with AI buddies from such places as Haiti, Northern Ireland, Algeria and China. Each character is essentially well voiced, even if the delivery at this point seems rushed. Incidental speech is effective, too: a profoundly dismissive, guttural "Fuck off" from a South African merc still haunts us.



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So far, there is little to suggest how vehicles' handle, but from the short gameplay trailer shown behind closed doors at Leipzig, it would seem to encourage a knockabout racing game that is more like *Motorstorm* than *Dirt*



While any remnant of civilisation has largely fled the wilderness, you'll still encounter AI vehicles ploughing across the landscape even when not in a race. Online supports up to 16 players, ensuring that there's at least one way you can prevent the big horizons feeling lonely

FORMAT: 360, PC, PS3
PUBLISHER: CODEMASTERS
DEVELOPER: ASOBO STUDIOS
ORIGIN: FRANCE
RELEASE: 2009



As any fuel kno

Fuel's dynamic navigation system sounds to be a pretty useful technology in itself – displayed as a 3D overlay and not only plotting offroad routes, but tailoring them to the capabilities of the vehicle you are in. Given that the game includes pretty much the entire gamut of petrol-powered ground vehicles, the kind of routes you can take vary substantially. Larger wheeled vehicles may find themselves able to forge across a shallow section of river, while those with better traction will find tracks open to them that will thwart others with steep inclines.

Fuel

The American wilderness is your speedway in Codemasters' latest

Perhaps it's all just a battle for numbers – an attempt to put a larger figure by a bullet point on the back of the box. Even so, the 5,000 square miles that *Fuel* gives you free rein to traverse is so vast in comparison to recent open-world racing games that it is necessarily more than a marketing hook. Constructed from a blend of satellite data, procedural generation and hand-crafted assets, *Fuel* draws together landmarks of the American wilderness – from Mount Rushmore, Yellowstone Park and Death Valley – which, according to the perfunctory scene-setting, have all now been abandoned to thrill-seeking petrolheads thanks to the ravages of global warming. Sandstorms and tornados rip across the planes, tearing up buildings and bridges, threatening to toss careless racers into the skies.

The size of this world raises equal huge questions, not least regarding the act of execution itself: could developer Asobo find itself hoist by its own petard? The



With such a large in-game environment, the manpower of Codemasters' QA division has proved a useful resource for Asobo, not just in squashing bugs and fine-tuning tracks, but in discovering and suggesting new places to hold race events. We hope players may be able to do the same with some form of sharing system



technology that underpins the gameworld is no doubt a considerable achievement if its claims of a 25-mile draw distance prove true – but there remains a risk that such an unwieldy expanse of land will defy the level of care and attention that makes Codemasters' other racing titles such fine, well-tuned spectacles. Additionally, there's the question of how players will approach such a vast and open environment: even the comparatively paltry cityscape of *Burnout Paradise* stretched the memories of players to the limit – what will they do when faced with learning the racing lines of some 62,100 miles of roadways?

Somewhat in opposition to the desire to stretch out the horizons ever further, Asobo has recognised the need to focus players, chaperoning them through purpose-designed zones as their career progresses. These, and the procedurally generated landscape between them, are freely explorable, and a mission editor will allow players to define the conditions for their own races, wherever they choose. The surrounding world may not be quite as interesting as the zones themselves,

but it seems unlikely that many players will thoroughly explore the wilderness given the ability to instantly teleport to any point on the map. In this, Asobo has avoided the strictness of *Burnout Paradise's* race structure, as well as allowing you to instantly retry any event, without having to drive back to the starting line, and furnishing you with a more accessible navigation system (see 'As any fuel kno'). Punitive though *Paradise* initially seemed, by preventing you from taking instant shortcuts the game forced you to learn and experience the environment as you might a real city. With *Fuel* being roughly 20 times the size of *Paradise City*, memorising your surroundings could well become as irrelevant as it is futile.

The potential for error rises hugely with the size of this world – even assuming Asobo manages to produce a racer that gets the basics right. Nonetheless, the developer's ambition can do little but inspire excitement, even if it prompts a little scepticism too; the prize of realising such a landscape in the context of a compelling game is certainly a trophy worth chasing.



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FORMAT: PC, PS3
PUBLISHER: SONY ONLINE ENTERTAINMENT
DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE (SOE SEATTLE)
ORIGIN: US
RELEASE: TBA
PREVIOUSLY IN: E178

The Agency

MMOs infiltrate shooter territory as SOE Seattle wants its persistent worlds shaken and stirred



Agency Moments are mini-cutsscenes that are triggered when you've done something particularly well – allowing for a stylish shot of your character detonating an enemy bomb, for example. The dreaded QTEs may also be incorporated

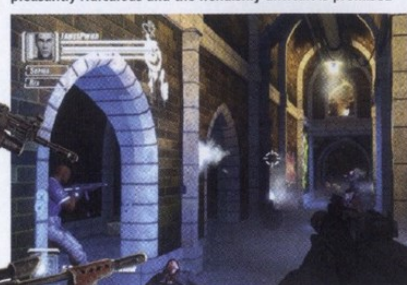


Drive another day

While *The Agency* will contain vehicle sections, SOE Seattle suggests they're most likely to provide the spokes between the hubs of the game's instanced areas and the larger communal spaces such as Prague. And they may also not be ready at launch. One thing that is definitely out is *Battlefield*-style vehicle-vs-on-foot combat – the developers believe that it's too difficult to balance in a game that has so many other things to worry about.



Achievements will be available on both versions of the game, presumably slotting into Trophies on PS3. A mixture of the pleasantly ridiculous and the fiendishly difficult is promised



a seamless world, our glimpse of the game focuses on Prague, a detailed landscape of red-tiled rooftops and cobbled streets. The only thing that breaks the illusion is the absence of lairy stag parties vomiting svickova over the Charles Bridge (hopefully this will be DLC), but to make up for that we've got ziplining super-spies and an HQ hidden behind a flower shop.

This is the base of Unite, the more elegant, Bond-style operatives of the game's two playable factions, the others being Paragon's muscular, cigar-chomping hardnuts (and that's just the women), whose hideout looks like a cross between a Mexican hairdressers and Jack Palance's favourite boozier. Intriguingly, these factions are not in direct conflict, they just go about things differently, the former favouring stealth and gadgets, the latter going for explosives, miniguns, and mid-era Aguilera-style chaps. It certainly beats choosing what flavour of elf to be.

From Unite's HQ, we head out on a trailing mission, where being spotted chips



If you're taken out of combat by a bullet, you can be revived by a teammate, *Gears Of War* style. Certain players will also be able to drop custom checkpoints

away at your alias stats in much the same way as being shot at chips away at your health. This soon leads into more conventional shooter territory, with an objective to protect a building's foundation pillars from being dynamited by terrorists.

Shooting looks like it has a real kick, and switching between first- and thirdperson calls to mind the elegance of *Oddworld: Stranger's Wrath*. While the mission itself is straightforward, there are clever ideas in play, such as a HUD that only appears when a usable object is targeted (a pickable lock, for example) or the ability to call in Operatives. Operatives have the potential to turn the game into a kind of Martini-flavoured Pokémon. They're collectable NPCs who can be called upon to help out in certain circumstances – in this case, shooting out a steam pipe to cause a diversion.

The demo's just long enough to provide a glimpse of a game that seems smart, witty and filled with variety. Along with *DC Universe*, it's yet another hint that the company behind *EverQuest* is looking to out-maneuvre Blizzard rather than fight directly. It may be a fair way from completion, but *The Agency* continues to look special – just don't go calling it cartoony.



Crossplatform play is entirely possible, but PS3 players will not be interacting with those on PC. The reason given is the perception of compromised controls, and since some of the team worked on *Shadowrun*, they probably know what they're talking about

Champions Online

Leotards and lasers present and correct, we venture beyond the City of Heroes

While SOE's *DC Universe* may have the licence with better name recognition, rival superhero-based MMOG *Champions Online* is not yet out of the fight. Cryptic Studios has already proved itself a worthy guardian of Silver Age nostalgia with *City Of Heroes*, and the tabletop game on which its latest MMOG is based plays to the developer's strengths in character customisation.

In fact, for those more interested in digital dress-up than they are in mobs and raids, *Champions Online* looks to be largely unrivalled. Even as a low-level character, the degree to which you can modify your appearance is exceptional, creating superheroes who are as marvellous as Marvel's own. Cryptic has eschewed classes in favour of greater customisation – currently there are eight groups of powers from which you choose your primary and secondary abilities, but even this restriction is largely for testing purposes. Come the final release, you'll be able to pick powers with much greater freedom.

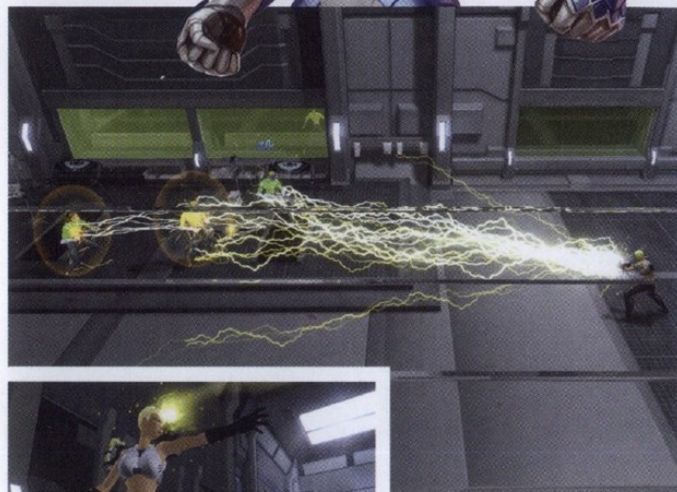
How these powers go about manifesting

themselves in-game is perhaps a little disappointing: though pitched towards the action side of the genre, the events onscreen convey little more visual impact than the turgid exchange of blows seen in any other MMOG, colourful pyrotechnics notwithstanding. It's only when a character imbued with the Might power picks up a piece of level furniture and tosses it into the fray that there is any greater sense of connection.

Regardless, the demo we see, which has players venturing through a mad scientist's stronghold in the Wilderness of Canada zone, is rammed with charming comic-book silliness – softening you up with cyborg dinosaurs and psychic clones before a showdown with a giant brain in a tank. There are still questions over how well the MMOG can be mapped to a 360 control pad, and doubts about the longevity of the game's action-lite core, but Cryptic's vision of a world with colourful caped crusaders and obligatory nemeses is thoroughly charming – and may yet prove kryptonite to *DC Universe's* plans.



FORMAT: 360, PC
PUBLISHER: 2K GAMES
DEVELOPER: CRYPTIC STUDIOS
ORIGIN: US
RELEASE: 2009



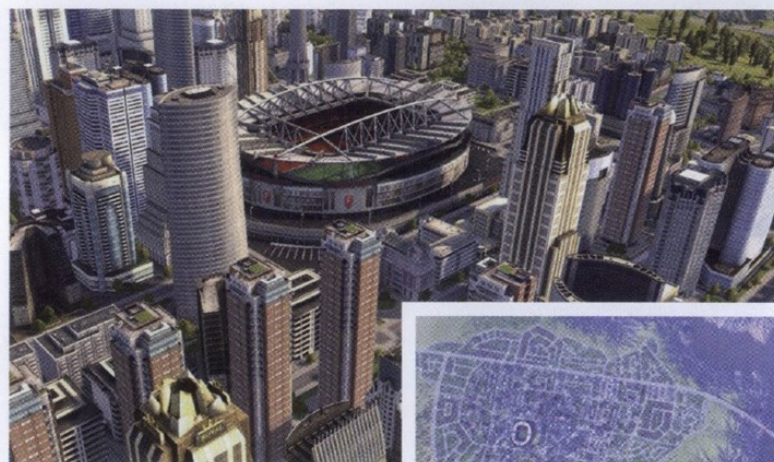
Combat appears to be largely a case of button-mashing and gauge-filling, and although the characters themselves look suitably super, the use of a comic-book style can't quite manage to mask how basic the environments are – a boon for low-end PC users, but nonetheless a concern for a game also being lined up for release on 360

Cities XL

A city planning game that aims to be more than bricks and mortar

Though you'd reasonably expect any future generation of city-building games to exceed predecessors in scale and scope, it's difficult not to feel a little sense of wonder as the camera pans smoothly down from a satellite view to ground level – a ground level that is alive with pedestrians and vehicles. Even once the shock of the new wears off, however, *Cities XL* proves it knows the genre well. Its building tools are powerful and ergonomic, allowing you to draw your city with huge freedom. Roads are created fluidly, with the ability to manually assign the number of lanes and even their direction. As you tug a bridge across a channel, it grows the structurally appropriate number of legs and arches required for its length. The economic makeup of a city is as vital as its physical layout – rich citizens think themselves too good for public transport and won't want to live more than 30 minutes from work.

If this detail is a baseline necessity for a current-generation city-building game, then the real innovation in *Cities XL* is the implementation of online, bringing urban



Monte Cristo anticipates expanding the game with micropayment-supported modules. We're shown a fairly comprehensive ski resort sim, and more business-based games from the *Rollercoaster Tycoon* mould are promised

planning into a global ecosystem populated by the competing cities of other players. There's everything you'd expect from a subscription MMOG in terms of persistence and socialisation, but the dev team has thought carefully about how players' creations affect one another, suggesting that entirely new avenues of play may be opened as users specialise their cities.



If EA is thinking of resurrecting the central line of the *SimCity* franchise then it may have to push its ambitions a little higher. Monte Cristo has added so much on top of the usual incremental cranking of detail and graphical polish that, if left unanswered, EA's franchise might be in danger of finding itself buried in *Cities XL's* foundations.

FORMAT: PC
PUBLISHER: MONTE CRISTO
DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE
ORIGIN: FRANCE
RELEASE: 2009



Buildings are zoned according to their type – residential or business, wealthy or poor, etc – but can be manually placed. The game will ship with 500 unique buildings, and more will be released later

FORMAT: 360, PC, PS3
PUBLISHER: ACTIVISION
DEVELOPER: TREYARCH
ORIGIN: US
RELEASE: CHRISTMAS
PREVIOUSLY IN: E191

Call Of Duty: World At War

No peace for the Pacific: Treyarch returns to World War II with a vengeance



Given the deadline of *Call Of Duty's* combat, Treyarch has wisely introduced a revive mechanic for co-operative play. Should a player be cut down, the survivor has 45 seconds to reach them before they are both returned to the nearest checkpoint



Infinity Ward's preceding *Call Of Duty* game was expert at putting you into morally compromised positions: its heroes performed assassinations, tortured terrorists for vital information and were not too worried when stray bullets punctured 'expendable' civilians. Though with *World At War* the series has shifted development studios and time periods, it makes similar promises to challenge your conscience.

Two campaigns form its central narrative – the sacking of Berlin by Russian forces, and the US campaign in the Pacific – and are both linked to the theme of revenge: the Russians' compassionless assault on the German capital being a response to the decimation of their home country; the American involvement in the war being prompted by the attack on Pearl Harbour. In other words, you can expect many moments at which characters pause to muse on the brotherhood of humanity, before shrugging and popping someone with a bayonet.

In order to hammer home the necessary amorality of human conflict, Treyarch has enlisted Kiefer Sutherland to growl his way



Sea-plane missions promise to be *World At War's* answer to *Modern Combat's* deeply unsettling sequence in the AC-130 gunship, in which players felt the detached violence of raining explosives down on to tiny dots below

through the Pacific Theatre as Sgt Roebuck, while other territories get the same dubbing actors used to voice his character in 24. The sequence we're presented with has Roebuck and his squad (one member controlled by another player) fight their way from a plane wreck in the jungle through a bunker complex and out on to open ground. The action is energising and varied: one moment Roebuck and co are repelling an ambush, the next they're dousing entrenched enemies with flames, before finding themselves in the midst of a chaotic tank battle.

Can the game keep up such a pace? The signs are heartening: Treyarch is well aware of just what *Modern Warfare* has done for the shooter and, even as the series goes back in time, *World At War* hopes to keep the genre moving forward.

Infamous

Volting ambition as Sucker Punch amps up the open world

Empire City has been cordoned off as a biohazard. A convenient enough device for a game looking to establish boundaries to its open world, but also neatly tying into the origin story for our protagonist, Cole. Shortly after his home is shattered by a mysterious blast, Cole awakes in the rubble to find himself imbued with electrical powers and, as the city falls to civil unrest, the player can choose how to employ them: do you become a defender of the innocent or rule Empire through fear?

Our demo session of the game resolutely fails to answer the question of just how substantial the effects of such a choice will be. It seems as though being good amounts to defibrillating citizens when they get caught in the crossfire between you and the gangs that have taken over the city – which, in this demonstration, are represented by a large number of identical gun-toting gang-bangers. Having zapped a few thugs, Cole demonstrates his *Altair*-esque climbing abilities, scaling a lamppost before leaping on to a building.

Cole can use streetlamps and other



electrical sources as a means of drawing power and healing – a facility which Sucker Punch periodically denies through blackouts in order to increase tension. This happens at one point in our demonstration as Cole encounters another super-powered citizen. Cole's opponent, a ghostly figure in a hoodie, has the ability to warp short distances, making him tricky to hit with the usual point-to-point electrical blasts – instead, Cole summons down a huge lightning strike from the sky, evaporating his enemy and tossing cars into the air.



Cole relies on foot transport, or train surfing, but there are hints that his powers might allow another way to get about. Could it explain the fully modelled electrical grid?

Many questions remain about *Infamous* – one of the largest being how much the decision to help people actually affects the world. Will the game drive towards making your actions feel significant, or simply aim to give players a super-charged sandbox – a high-voltage version of *Crackdown*?



Apparently, Empire City has a 'crime ecology' – a buzz-phrase used to describe the unscripted way in which muggings and other incivilities occur, giving Cole plenty of chances to play Samaritan. We hope it all amounts to more than an alternate ending

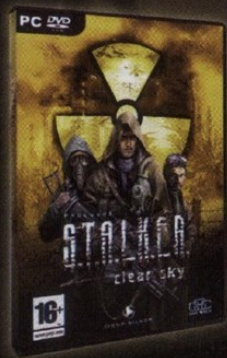
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PROLOGUE

STALKER

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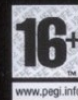
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FORMAT: 360
PUBLISHER: MICROSOFT GAME STUDIOS
DEVELOPER: ENSEMBLE STUDIOS
ORIGIN: US
RELEASE: 2009

Halo Wars

Bungie's universe undergoes a change of perspective

Having spent at least a small part of its early gestation as a Macintosh RTS, it's perhaps fitting that *Halo* should return to the genre that initially inspired it. Given what the series has ultimately become, though, you'd be forgiven for wondering how large a portion of the established FPS audience will migrate to a slower, more tactical title just because it promises a shared universe and characters. It's no surprise, then, that accessibility and authenticity are the two key tenets to which *Halo Wars* consistently adheres.



The different armies are instantly identifiable through bright, team-specific colouring, but individual unit types can be harder to pick out. Still, with only three types of unit per class, you have a good chance of guessing right



In addition to the standard units, bases can be obliterated using orbiting weapons platforms. Carpet bombing and nuclear-scale ordnance are demonstrated, and the Covenant will have its own doomsday devices, no doubt

The firstperson-controlled camera with its central reticule is designed to evoke instant, comfortable familiarity and your intentions are never more than a button-press or two away from becoming orders. Based on our hands-on session, there's remarkably little to juggle in a skirmish, even during larger base offensives. The interface appears to suggest that there are only three unit types in each class, such as flying or ground vehicles, with an optional upgrade for each, and bases are modular constructions with rigid layouts. Units themselves are recognisably *Halo*, though the drop in detail is such that the multitudinous Spartans – this is a prequel, after all – require an interface marker to differentiate them from regular infantry.

The potential danger *Halo Wars* faces is that Microsoft and Ensemble Studios could well have placed the credit for *Halo's* success squarely at the feet of its fiction and ignored

the finesse and mechanical excellence of Bungie's FPS. There is an overwhelming feeling that, in the mere 20 minutes or so of playtime we are offered, *Halo Wars* has displayed most of its wares, and that Ensemble is cripplingly wary of alienating what it considers the average *Halo* fan. Over-reliance on a skin, no matter how popular, that can be peeled back to reveal a generic console strategy game seems risky, particularly when a genre-traversing spin-off might, by its very nature, already suffer from diminishing returns.

Stormrise

An RTS that's as fast on console as on PC – and not a mic in sight

While *EndWar* continues to promote voice-command as the way forward for console strategy, it seems like the analogue stick may have some life left in it yet. While clearly a poor replacement for the mouse when it comes to drawing selection boxes, Creative Assembly's Australian branch has hit upon a way of using a gamepad to control units demonstrably faster than even the speed of speech.

Given the slick, PR-friendly term of 'whip-select', the feature is put into practice for us by QA tester Sanatana Mishra, who also happens to be one of Australia's top *WarCraft III* players. Pushing the right stick in a direction brings up a dial radiating from centre-screen. Rotating the stick then swings it round, like the arm of a clock, to point at the icon of the desired unit. Alternatively, a quick flick of the same stick transfers control to the nearest unit in that direction, allowing you to rapidly leapfrog across your army without the need for the more precise selection 'whip'.

It seems to work for Mishra – perhaps too well for the purposes of a clear



With the camera fixed behind your selected unit, you don't have a comprehensive view of the field of battle, but the icons for your offscreen force nestle at its edges, making it easy to precisely select any unit in your army

demonstration – and we're left wondering if only a world-class *WarCraft III* player could distinguish one unit icon from another at speed, particularly when the orientation of the camera keeps changing. Sega Australia's man on the scene, Vispi Bhojti, is quick to emphasise that the visual design is far from final – particularly the way information is displayed on the HUD, but also unit and environment design. This is something of a relief, as it would be a shame for the control scheme to be the only remarkable thing about this game – currently sporting a somewhat drab post-apocalyptic setting. Somewhat inevitably, more people will buy *Halo Wars* but, shopworn stylings aside, it may well prove to be *Stormrise* that has the smarter ideas on how to bring down strategy's platform-specific stigma.



As good as it is, we're a little relieved that there is an alternative to voice command – particularly for sci-fi strategy games. We can stomach telling numbered units to move here and there, but it's a little more embarrassing when you're barking at your Brood Queen



We press Lindop about whether the game makes any concessions to the run-and-gun FPS gamer. "I think one of the reasons to bring *Operation Flashpoint* to the console is to offer something else," he says



Operation Flashpoint 2: Dragon Rising

Codemasters' military sim returns, but this time the Eagle has the Bear's back

We're counting down until he mentions the 'r' word. "It's about realism," says **Clive Lindop**, nine seconds into our recording. Lindop is the lead AI designer on the sequel to *Operation Flashpoint*, a game that was unforgiving in its attempts to recreate the lethality of real-world combat – and brilliant for it. *Dragon Rising*, despite a simultaneous release on supposedly sim-averse consoles, aims for even greater fidelity. But, Lindop says, this will actually make things a little easier.

"What made the first one really hard was that there was simply nothing there, and if you can't hide anywhere that means death. Now, there's cover. The other reason was that the AI in the original game had no fear of anything. It would see you from 400 metres away and take the perfect shot right through your eye."

While a bullet is no less lethal in *Dragon Rising*, suppressive fire is the main use of a weapon. As Lindop says: "You don't fire a gun for the first time and expect to get a

kill, you do it to put a lot of bullets out in front of you."

Combat in *Dragon Rising* is far from the close-quarters run-and-gun of *Call Of Duty*. Instead, the live demonstration sees the tense ascent of a grassy hill, shrouded in a cordite smog – pausing occasionally to spray bullets in the direction of an indistinct shape on the horizon, before speeding to the next patch of cover. Lindop pauses to say something about the tank accompanying the infantry surge – but sighs with resignation at the sight of its smoldering husk. Such are the risks of demonstrating a game with so much unscripted, emergent behaviour.

"We say to the mission guys: never, ever build a mission where the objective is a structure or a person, because you can guarantee it won't be there," says Lindop. "Like, 'There's a guy in this house who you have to meet' – well, no, you won't, because he'll be dead."

The fight doesn't wait for the player, Lindop explains: "You are not the centre of



"It was tempting to do Iraq or Afghanistan but that always leads you down a particular road," says Lindop. "You'd artificially have to balance it so that one side can actually have a stand-up fight with the US marines"

the universe. You could even just hide behind some cover and do nothing. The combat will continue around you – it'll play out to the bitter end. Your role is to make a difference – to go in there and tip the balance in your side's favour."

While battles rage on regardless of player action, *Dragon Rising* doesn't wholly commit its 85 square miles (220 square kilometres) of island to the idea of an open-world war. Instead, the game's progress is broken up into enclosed episodes within the greater campaign, each with clear conditions for failure and victory. Nonetheless, there is a degree of persistence between missions – assault an anti-aircraft position and you may find your life as a helicopter pilot a lot easier down the line, but it would be a shame if this was the limit of the main campaign's dynamism. *Operation Flashpoint* has already established itself as the antithesis of the linear cinema offered by other military shooters – with Codemasters' Ego engine drawing an entire island, *Dragon Rising* has the potential to create a simulation of conflict on an unprecedented scale.

As in the previous game, wounds will impair movement or aiming, but it's easy to be killed outright. Even hits in the arm or leg may lead to death, and body armour won't do much to stop a 50-calibre round to the chest



FORMAT: 360, PC, PS3
PUBLISHER: CODEMASTERS
DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE
ORIGIN: UK
RELEASE: 2009



Game for a PLAAF

Set in the present day, *Dragon Rising* places you among US marines on the island of Skira, where a pugnacious China has based air-force units to support its assault on Russia.

"We wanted to have two modern combat forces that could go toe-to-toe without artificially weighting the game. But there is a logic behind it," says Lindop, detailing a scenario in which rogue People's Liberation Army generals attempt to destabilise China by invading Russia. "This could happen tomorrow. I said this to one of the publishing guys, and he was like: 'Do you think this could happen before the game comes out?' I'm not sure how that would affect sales..."

FORMAT: 360, PS3
PUBLISHER: KONAMI
DEVELOPER: DOUBLE HELIX GAMES
ORIGIN: US
RELEASE: SEPT 30 (US), NOV 20 (UK)
PREVIOUSLY IN: £190



Silent Hill: Homecoming

If a walking tumour keels over in the mist, does it make a sound?

Homecoming has a premise that takes the series slightly out of its comfort zone, but *Silent Hill* has always been characterised by a willingness to take risks and play with its own fundamental formula. One thing has stayed the same, however: the games have never dealt with the real world. Yet *Homecoming* features an outsider, Alex

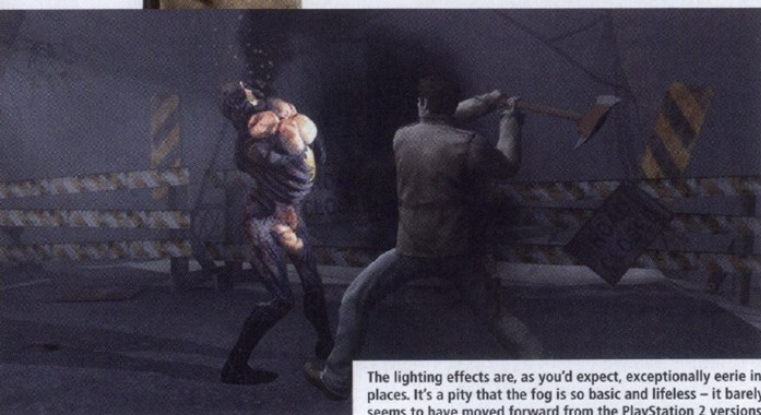
Shepherd, a returning soldier from a so-far unnamed war, who may carry some more contemporary parallels into the ambiguous nightmare. The potential this brings to a series that thrives on exploring repression and inner conflict cannot be overstated, though whether Double Helix can exploit such rich possibilities has yet to be seen.



Homecoming has remained true to the series' peculiar fascination for decor featuring fleshy orifices and rusty walls. The monsters, meanwhile, are as tortured as ever

What is clear, however, is the worrying sign that *Homecoming* might also be abandoning some of the more important traditions of the series. The most noticeable of these by far is a new focus on violence. The usual assortment of tumescent pusbags slobber and squelch around the town, but Shepherd is a far more brutal fighter than his predecessors. Finishers involving ramming pipes through enemies' heads and stomping on their faces to pull them out, tearing their entrails loose with an axe, or simply some good old-fashioned bludgeoning.

Silent Hill games have always been liberally scattered with grotesque and gory moments, but they're somewhat different to the newly savage atmosphere here, which, combined with Shepherd's fighting proficiency, removes much of the fear from any encounter. Whether this is the case for the game beyond the opening sections that we've played, and whether Shepherd's potential as a character is capitalised upon or left begging, is yet unknown. We await finding out with no small amount of trepidation.



The lighting effects are, as you'd expect, exceptionally eerie in places. It's a pity that the fog is so basic and lifeless – it barely seems to have moved forward from the PlayStation 2 versions



The House Of The Dead: Overkill

Zombies and strippers and guns. Oh, my. The on-rails shooter goes grindhouse

FORMAT: WII
PUBLISHER: SEGA
DEVELOPER: HEADSTRONG GAMES
ORIGIN: UK
RELEASE: 2009

Headstrong has certainly squeezed a great deal out of the hardware – although there's a fair amount of repetition in your enemies



Unimaginable scenes of human degradation!' exclaims *Overkill's* promotional material, doled out to the press in the form of a battered B-movie VHS cassette box. And then, brilliantly: 'This is like something out of a videogame!'

Sega has tasked Headstrong Games with bringing the *House Of The Dead* franchise to a western audience – you might be forgiven for thinking it was already fairly well established over here, but the UK developer has clearly jumped into zombisplotation pastiche with macabre enthusiasm. As Headstrong's Bradley Crooks takes us through the game's funfair level, we spot severed hands spinning in candy-floss tumblers, a hot-dog vendor sizzling face-down on his own grill, and body parts pinned to the wall at the knife-throwing stall: all of it both gruesome and ludicrous in fine grindhouse tradition. The screen even flickers with the streaks and burns of an ageing film reel.

As far as the fairly static genre of the on-rails shooter goes, *Overkill* looks to have a few ideas of its own. While movement is still strictly predefined, dragging the reticule to the side of the screen will allow you to actually turn your view 40 degrees in any direction, allowing you to spot hidden items and enemies. Meanwhile, a combo bar builds as you make successful shots, increasing further when you save civilians from peril – ultimately increasing your final score and unlocking new items and equipment. There's also an adrenaline meter which you can expend by moving into what the development team calls 'mofo slo-mo', giving you a chance to appreciate the detail that has been worked into the explosion of a zombie's brain-pan.

With drop-in/drop-out co-op, *Overkill* looks likely to match up to existing Wii shooters such as *Ghost Squad* and *Umbrella Chronicles* for same-couch silliness. Throw in mad scientists, strippers and breathless claims of being 'so frightening you'll cry blood from your own eyes', and Headstrong may well have us baying for its brains.



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Sid Meier's classic strategy game reinvented in the world of Civilization IV.

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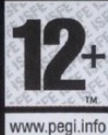
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Games for Windows



TrackMania DS largely avoids the blockiness that plagues the majority of DS racers. Even though the polygon count is low, what is there moves along at such a pace that you're unlikely to notice a few rough edges



TrackMania DS

Firebrand sets the handheld backmarker genre back on track

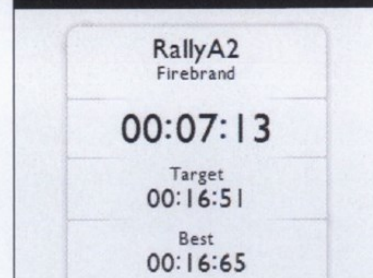
FORMAT: DS
PUBLISHER: FOCUS HOME
INTERACTIVE
DEVELOPER: FIREBRAND GAMES
ORIGIN: UK
RELEASE: WINTER

Racing remains the one portable armament race in which PSP has left its dominant rival spluttering on the starting line. Comical efforts such as *Burnout Legends* and *Need For Speed: Most Wanted*, released early in DS's lifespan, were inept enough to convince most big-name publishers to brand the concept of DS racing games as a folly. In this light, the decision made by Glasgow-based Firebrand Games to identify itself as a 'DS racing game specialist' may have been seen by some as a self-fulfilling prophecy. However, the up-and-coming studio's developmental tunnel vision has resulted in an explosion of light at the end of it all. Building on its inaugural success with Codemasters' *Race Driver* franchise, Firebrand's DS interpretation of Nadeo's sublime *TrackMania* series is so speedy and smooth that it leaves previous DS racing games looking like relics from a

bygone era – even *Mario Kart DS* seems sluggish by comparison.

TrackMania DS, in replicating its PC source material so meticulously, is something of a technical feat. Locked at a steady 60 frames per second, it's also the fastest racer on DS. The instant restart feature, so integral to the 'one more go' appeal of *TrackMania*, is present and correct – a tap of the X button is all that's needed to return to the starting line. The camera even zooms in to a firstperson mode upon hitting a loop – the infusion of vertigo loses nothing in its translation to the small screen.

The necessary concession to storage capacity comes in the number of track types available – Rally and Desert join *TrackMania Nations'* Stadium environment in a streamlined line-up that does well to capture the essence of the *TrackMania* series in just three disciplines. The other notable absentee



Success in the singleplayer game translates into currency that can be used to purchase additional tracks and building blocks for the editor from the in-game shop

is the ability to save ghost data – a truly disappointing omission, but one that becomes perfectly understandable when you consider where the cartridge's resources have instead been used.

The track editor – for some, the most important part – allows up to 60 custom courses to be stored, which can then be shared with other users locally. Wifi link-up is an aim, Firebrand admits, for any sequels. Building on the interface used with such success in *Race Driver: Create & Race*, the track builder allows you to drop into a course in progress at any point to test for inconsistencies and bugs. Only tracks that have been successfully completed by their creators can be shared; similarly, medal targets are staggered by the best times attained by the creator during testing. The track editing facility has proved so flexible that Firebrand has elected to use it to build the 100-plus singleplayer mode tracks. Only in a few instances has the developer tampered with the editor's self-imposed limitations to create a track that could not be otherwise created (intricate knowledge of the machine's limitations and how to circumvent them coming into play). Wifi deficiencies aside, it's hard to see how Firebrand could improve upon a game that doesn't so much touch the sides of the technical capabilities of Nintendo's machine as it does smash into them.

Tyres across the divide

TrackMania has always been at its strongest in multiplayer. While this iteration cannot hope to match the community-led mayhem of its PC parent, there remains plenty of options for DS owners, regardless of the number of consoles or cartridges involved. Players compete for the best times, either in a single lap or within a time limit in a manner similar to that of the current F1 qualifying rounds. If there is only a single DS doing the rounds, players can take advantage of the hotseat option, but as on PC, the panic-fuelled thrill of a simultaneous finish-line scramble between multiple players remains the moment that best defines *TrackMania*.

TrackMania's puzzle mode makes a welcome return: complete unfinished tracks using a small cache of spare pieces, then attempt to beat a set time limit



Ragnarok Online DS

It's the end of the world as we know it, again, so it's time once more to gather a party of pretty sprites

Ragnarok Online, based on a popular South Korean comic, is one of Asia's leading MMORPGs. Following Capcom's PSP success with *Monster Hunter Portable*, which was in large part due to the game's networking features, as well as Sega's remarkable success with *Phantasy Star Portable* (over 500,000 copies sold of a port), it's safe to say that it's not the only franchise of its ilk eyeing up handheld platforms.



The release date has been timed to coincide exactly with the series' sixth anniversary: *Ragnarok* and its sequel have been hugely successful in the Korean MMO market. This may work out very well for DS's future in the region

Gungaho, the Japanese server provider for the South Korean original, is bringing *Ragnarok Online* to DS, hoping that the network appeal exists across platforms. It's a little coy about diving straight in, though: *Ragnarok Online DS* is as much a solo experience as a mini-MMORPG, having an original storyline (with a new main character, Ares) that allows you to play through and level up with NPC allies. Despite this, the real draw of the game is undoubtedly the network mode, which allows up to three players to join forces over 50 randomly generated dungeons.

The game itself translates easily from mouse to stylus: all standard actions such as movement are mapped to the touchscreen, and most of the special actions and casts are triggered by a specific flourish. They're intuitive enough: drawing a circle will trigger an attack only in that close area around the character, and focus its strength. There's all the levelling you might expect, but with a great degree of customisation as to how your character evolves – and, this being an Asian MMOG,



there's a huge variety of clothes and accessories available to tweak your physical appearance. The other notable feature? For a DS game, it's coming in at a whopping ¥6,090 (£32) – well above the going rate for new handheld games in Japan. Still, you wouldn't bet against it.

FORMAT: DS
PUBLISHER: GUNGHO ONLINE
DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE
ORIGIN: JAPAN/SOUTH KOREA
RELEASE: DECEMBER 18 (JAPAN),
TBA (EUROPE, US)

Ragnarok Online is still going strong, despite the release of a full sequel, thanks to carrots like the War of Emperium – a massive fight held once a week. Unfortunately, there's no way this could even be approximated on DS



Theresia: Dear Emile

At the end of the murky dungeon is the prize of becoming a publisher

Arc System Works has always been well known as a developer of arcade games, having made the *Guilty Gear* games as well as *Fist Of The North Star* and two *Dragon Ball Z* spin-offs, but rapidly changing conditions in the Japanese (and global) videogame market have pushed the company into becoming a consumer publisher. It's a difficult move, but one made possible by the ongoing dominance of Nintendo's DS and the evergreen PS2.

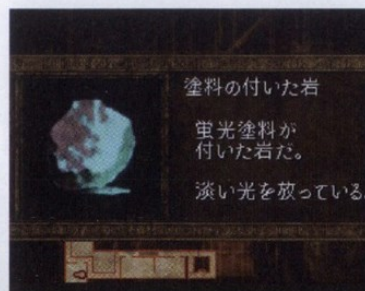
Theresia is a mix of genres and influences. It's superficially a firstperson dungeon crawler, but the emphasis is much more on exploration than combat. The touchscreen brings pointing and clicking into this unfamiliar setting, being used both to look around and inspect items of interest as well as perform specific interactions with elements of the scenery and items.

The initial exploration quickly leads to the realisation that the world is booby-trapped. From here, the game is all about finding the appropriate tools and items to disarm the traps and penetrate further into the dungeon. As the scenario evolves it's



The traps can be triggered by almost anything interactive in the environment, whether a big switch marked 'DANGER' or a wooden chair. The game is currently being localised: whether this patient, suspenseful exploration will translate well is unclear, but corridors like the above won't do it any favours

clear that it carries more than a hint of the cult film *Cube*: the heroine awakes to find herself in some ruined underground place, surrounded by traps, with no recollection of her past or why she is there. Eventually, more human characters are found that only heighten the mystery. We'll need to keep a watch for the western release to see what happens next.



FORMAT: DS
PUBLISHER: ARC SYSTEM WORKS
DEVELOPER: WORK JAM
ORIGIN: JAPAN
RELEASE: OUT NOW (JAPAN)



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CHINATOWN IN YOUR HAND

HOW DOES ROCKSTAR
FOLLOW GRAND THEFT
AUTO IV? BY REBUILDING
LIBERTY CITY FROM THE
GROUND UP ON DS - AND
NOT COMPROMISING
ITS VISION ONE IOTA

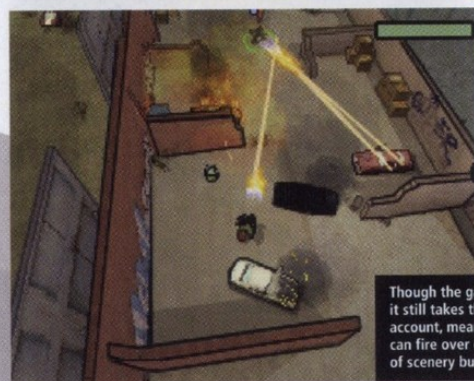


During the journey to Rockstar's New York offices we've been trying to build a mental picture of what *Grand Theft Auto: Chinatown Wars* will look like. In fact, we've been trying to do this, on and off, ever since the game's official announcement at E3, and we've more or less settled on something that is a bastardised take on the PSP iterations – and not only because we're aware that the game is being built by Rockstar Leeds, the studio behind *Liberty City* and *Vice City Stories*. It isn't, frankly, an image that fills us with optimism, and by the time we sit down in front of Rockstar's jumbo-sized DS demo pod we're quite prepared for something that fails to capture the spirit of the series by reaching beyond the comfortable limits of Nintendo's DS hardware. But then the demo begins, the action spills over the dual screens, and our doubts begin to melt away. Finally, we are finally able to sit back into the generously proportioned sofa and enjoy what *Chinatown Wars* is, rather than worrying about what it isn't.

Had we thought it through properly – the way Rockstar has, in other words – perhaps we too would have settled on a graphical presentation that takes a three-quarter view of Liberty City not entirely dissimilar to that of certain classics from yesteryear. Think *Syndicate Wars*, throw in a bolder colour palette and a more finely meticulous regard for detail, then ramp up the animation, and you're getting there. You still need to factor in GTA's particularly glee-inducing brand of action, however, which instantly gives the experience a dazzling sense of life, propelled by a brand of dynamism and chaos rarely seen on Nintendo's console in an age when an entire genre exists in which the player's pleasure is derived from grooming digital dogs and then buying them little hats.

The result, when running at full lick, with vehicles ripped apart by explosions, gunfire

TITLE: GRAND THEFT AUTO: CHINATOWN WARS
FORMAT: DS
PUBLISHER: ROCKSTAR GAMES
DEVELOPER: ROCKSTAR LEEDS/NORTH
ORIGIN: UK
RELEASE: WINTER



Though the game is '2.5D', it still takes the X-axis into account, meaning that you can fire over certain types of scenery but not others

streaking across the streets and bodies keeling over in bloody pools, is mesmerising. Even at its most pedestrian, though, the world of *Chinatown Wars* is one you want to observe like a scientist peering into a Petri dish. The residents of this concrete playground leave their houses, get into their cars or wander the streets, stopping to have conversations or buy snacks from fast-food carts. All the while, the roads are being navigated by a catalogue of automobiles, from clapped-out saloons to zippy hatchbacks and chugging trucks, with police prowlers and emergency vehicles also figuring in the mix. You can steal any one of them, of course (and, yes, choose to earn extra cash performing paramedic runs when driving an

"THE FIREFIGHTS ARE INSANE. ONCE WE STARTED TO GET THAT KIND OF PERFORMANCE ON THE DS WE KNEW IT WAS GOING TO BE REALLY ENJOYABLE"

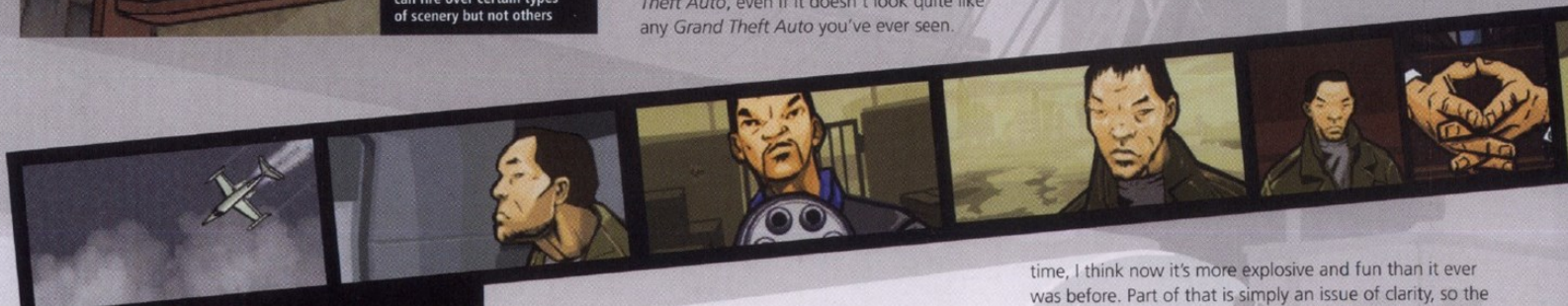
ambulance). This world has physical properties, too: fences, street lamps and newsstands are smashed aside, for example, as you make the offroad diversions that inevitably punctuate your escapes from the law. A full day/night cycle also exists, along with realtime shadowing and a dynamic weather system (the game's citizens even pull out umbrellas and hold them aloft when it rains). And it all dynamically rotates through 360 degrees to deliver an optimum view. Evidently, this really is *Grand Theft Auto*, even if it doesn't look quite like any *Grand Theft Auto* you've ever seen.

always liked that isometric view and kind of had it in the back pocket as a fun thing that could be revisited. This was the perfect hardware for it."

So the viewpoint suited the host hardware, but there are other considerations at play which have been created with a firm view of the hardware's diminutive screens. For starters, the graphical style is almost cel-shaded. "The visual style uses quite a strong outline to make everything pop more – we wanted something that looked very vibrant," explains Houser. But it goes further than that. Significantly, Rockstar Leeds' artists are playing around with proportion: when you exit a car you can see that, really, you're a little bit too big for it. In the real world,

you'd be looking at standing seven or eight feet tall.

"The characters on foot are exaggerated for the very simple reason of being able to inject them with character when viewed from above," says Houser. "It just isn't as fun otherwise – we did various experiments with this kind of thing. This way, you can actually see what your character is doing. And one of the great successes of the game at the moment is that the out-of-car action feels really fun. It was always a challenge to make that seem fun in *GTA1* and *2*, and as much as we loved them at the

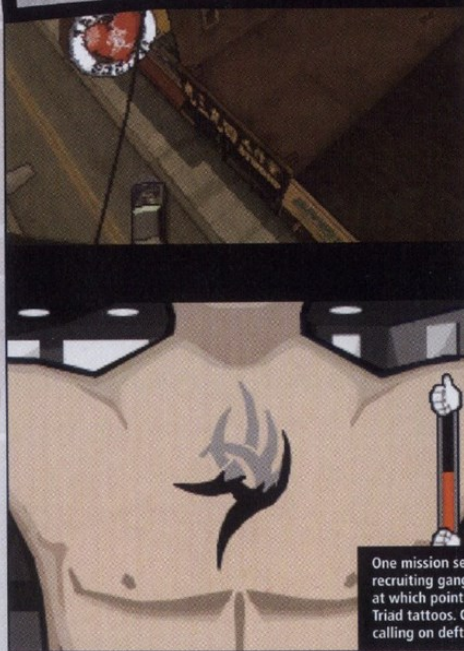


"It's cutting your cloth to match the body you can put it on, isn't it?" says **Dan Houser** of the game's aesthetic approach. Houser, vice president of creative at Rockstar and brother of company president Sam, is our host today, and is proving as enthusiastic about this particular incarnation of the *GTA* legend as he is anything that carries the unique brand, over which he has a guardian role. "The challenge," he explains, "is to make something that works and is optimised for the hardware but at the same time is *GTA*, with the core things that make it *GTA* – such as having an open-world environment that you can move around freely, and a good density of population. The firefights are insane, and once we started to get that kind of performance on the DS we knew it was going to be really enjoyable. We wanted it to be feel almost like a *GTA* version of a classic arcade game – it seems like it's being very serious but then it's very fun and undermining itself constantly."

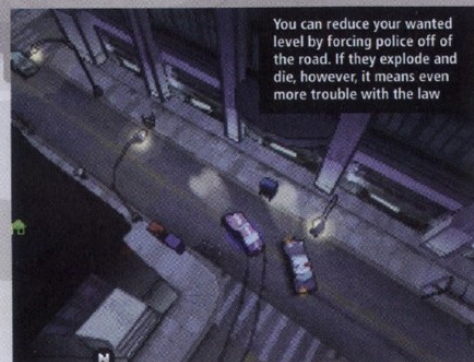
We wonder how long it took to decide upon the presentational style, given the difficulties we had in envisioning it. It turns out that Rockstar was working from an advantageous position. "This type of viewpoint was something we'd played around with years before, just after *GTA2*," Houser reveals. "And we'd never used it in a commercial game, but we

time, I think now it's more explosive and fun than it ever was before. Part of that is simply an issue of clarity, so the explosions are really powerful, and the firefights look great. The bullet traces are obviously super-exaggerated, but that all helps with figuring out what you're doing."

This is a scaled-down *GTA*, then, but also one that is larger than life in a way that *GTAIV*, in some ways, was not. "Even if it doesn't have the depth that you could get with, say, *Niko* in *GTAIV*, it's an interesting creative challenge for us," says Houser. "And not just in terms of it being fun to drive the cars – which it is – or shooting the guns and causing all the explosions, but also just fun



One mission sees you recruiting gang members, at which point they require Triad tattoos. Cue a minigame calling on deft stylus work



You can reduce your wanted level by forcing police off of the road. If they explode and die, however, it means even more trouble with the law

to work through the story. And that's a challenge for us because the platform does not support the kind of things we've done in the past – the full 3D cutscenes that flow seamlessly into the rest of the game. So we had to work out new ways to do that kind of thing."

In order to tell the story (see 'Trouble in Chinatown') in the absence of 3D-driven exposition, Rockstar has settled on a comic-book style that sits perfectly alongside the clearly defined, almost cartoony visuals of the action proper. Offering stills of Rockstar's customarily charismatic characters as their dialogue is delivered via text, together with the occasional animated feature in the second screen, it is a compact, elegant solution.

Something else that needed working out was a control system. Modern *GTA* is very much a game that requires the opportunities afforded by analogue control, something that has been refined again and again in iterative outings, but in the DS hardware Rockstar faced having to start again from scratch. "We were nervous about it at first," concedes Houser, "but you're using a D-pad, and occasionally a stylus, and pretty quickly you forget about the interface being different. You're not going: 'Oh god, isn't there a better way to do this?'" It's because Leeds did a lot of work making the car handling feel nice and responsive, without being so twitchy that you're thrown everywhere."



Another straightforward touchscreen activity involves rotating a screwdriver to steal a car. Hotwiring is a more involved process



TROUBLE IN CHINATOWN

You play the part of Huang Lee, a Hong Kong-based member of the Chinese Triads who's arriving in Liberty City (the gameworld is based on the most recent iteration of the region, as seen in *GTA IV*, albeit minus the landmass of Alderney) with the 'Yu Jian', a much-revered symbolic sword that is being passed from his recently assassinated father to his uncle, Wu 'Kenny' Lee. Unfortunately, your passage into America doesn't run smoothly: first, you're shot by unknown assailants, then you're robbed, and finally you're cast into the Humbolt River as a dead man. So you've lost the sword, your uncle isn't best pleased, and there's still the matter of avenging your father's death. And so *Chinatown Wars* properly begins...

This work has involved incorporating a driving system that automatically assists the player in staying on the road, helping to avoid collisions at high speed – especially the type that usually follow fierce left-hand turns when you have cops hugging your rear bumper. "There's a little bit of auto-alignment," Houser continues, "but it's subtle and it's to make the driving a little forgiving, without it feeling like you're wearing armbands or something. In some ways it's no different to an auto-aim, really."

As Rockstar's first DS game, *Chinatown Wars* has to make accomplished use of the platform's technologies, and it's little surprise to see that Rockstar Leeds has engineered a series of minigames that incorporate its touchscreen interface. Such a consideration didn't get immediate buy-in from the likes of Houser, however. "For a while we were nervous because I think one of the other things that's very important to *GTA* is the seamlessness – it's a very flowing experience," he recalls. "A core element of *GTA* is that there's no line between shooting and driving, which were traditionally very segmented aspects





within games. So we were very nervous about the minigames until we played them, and then we realised that the guys at Leeds had nailed them – they worked really well with what the hardware can do.”

How about pulling up at a filling station and using the stylus to carefully aim a petrol-pump nozzle so that it dispenses fuel into bottles which, once they’ve had rags stuffed down their necks, are turned into Molotov cocktails? Or fiddling with a car’s ignition system in order to hotwire it? Punching out the rear window of a car that is rapidly sinking in a harbour having been launched from a jetty by the bad guys? All of these things feed in to the minigame experiences and, importantly, they seem to stack up logically rather than being divorced from what the core of *GTA* is supposed to be all about.

So, what about creating a game such as this on a platform that has been so carefully positioned as a quick-fix entertainment device? The likes of *Brain Training* are perfectly suited to playing on the bus, but we saw from the likes of the PSP *GTA* games that high-intensity experiences involving missions that encompass driving, shooting and other objectives don’t travel nearly so well. “We’re always looking at those issues and trying to hone and optimise games for where they’ll be played,” says Houser. “The PSP games used some elements of code and design from the PS2 games, whereas this is done from the ground up, and we’ve tried to make the missions a bit shorter, for example. But without wishing to engage in a hardware debate, in some ways the success of the DS is about quick and easy-access stuff, and some of the complications involved with the PSP involve people trying to make console games and not really thinking it through. I always think the PSP works really well on the plane but not on the bus. We try to make it something in nice bite-sized chunks that still offers a good sense of flow and works well over longer periods, and hopefully through



This is perhaps the simplest touchscreen minigame we’ve played, involving hauling bags from a bin to uncover a convenient stash of weapons



our past experience we'll be better at doing it. We're aware of it. You'll obviously still have moments where you're on the bus and in the middle of a massive firefight and then you'll have to get off. And that's unsolvable. But you can make the game autosave. It's no different from reading a book and getting to an interesting section, then having to get off the Tube."

We're coming to the end of our checklist of concerns, but we've reached a considerable one. Just how authentic a *GTA* will this be in terms of its tone? It clearly hits the right spots in many of the key areas but, given that it will be running on a Nintendo platform that happens to be popular with many millions of young children, are its adult themes going to be compromised? "No one disagreed with Sam's very clear edict that *GTA* has to be an M rating," asserts Houser. "It can't be softened to make it family-friendly – that's not the game we're making. We've never not done well by sticking to our guns. In terms of presentation this is a different game, but in terms of the themes and the language it's very similar. We wanted the cutscenes to feel like they are



GTA is about stealing cars and shooting people – how could it not be an 18 rating? You couldn't do *GTA* without that 18 – it wouldn't feel like it's supposed to feel. I think Nintendo are excited to have a game unlike any other on their hardware, a game that might pull in an audience that want the content that maybe they aren't being offered at the moment."

There are certainly few other DS games that manage to incorporate an entire drug-dealing enterprise as a kind of minigame (see 'Dope demand') – a surprisingly fleshed-out diversion we were not expecting.

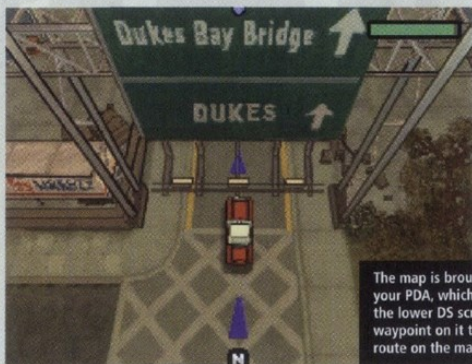


Gunplay is handled by aiming with the D-pad and then locking on to targets in established *GTA* fashion. It is more hectic and action-packed than you might think possible on a DS screen, and proves terrifically engaging. Throwing projectiles such as grenades, meanwhile, is done via the touchscreen

"GTA HAS TO BE M-RATED. IT CAN'T BE SOFTENED TO MAKE IT FAMILY-FRIENDLY – THAT'S NOT THE GAME WE'RE MAKING. WE'RE NOT WATERING IT DOWN"

almost like from a classic arcade game – then, when the characters are talking about something that is horrendous or funny or ridiculous, that juxtaposition felt very cool to us. It's almost like *GTA* in another environment. We definitely didn't do any watering down.

"Nintendo wanted us to make *GTA*, and we wanted to make a game on their platform. They didn't want us to make a *GTA* for kids, and we weren't interested in making a game we wouldn't normally make. I mean,



The map is brought up on your PDA, which appears on the lower DS screen. Plot a waypoint on it to mark out a route on the main action view

Following on from *GTA IV*, a game grounded more in reality in some respects than its precursor, *San Andreas*, we weren't expecting flamethrower or stun-gun weapons, either, but here they are, roasting and toasting your assailants (or, indeed, any hapless so-and-so within the gameworld at which you wish to aim them). There's even a minigun, which energetically rips perforations into targets as you spray its ordnance at a suitably cranked-up rate. Meanwhile, the missions themselves appear to have a similar capacity to deliver surprises.

"We've got some good, outlandish stuff in there," smiles Houser. "We always try to put in as much variety as possible. There's one mission where you're robbing a bank and you've got to escape through Chinatown, and there's a parade, so you dress up as a dragon. There's lots of fun stuff like that. Not silly, but varied. Things that really work with the tone of the game."

And so our journey ends as it began, as we try to fill in more pieces of the *Chinatown Wars* puzzle, imagining what further challenges lie beyond the shootouts and car chases we've played today. Our progress isn't good. Fortunately, it all lies in the hands of a group of uncommonly passionate creatives who know what they're doing with this *GTA* stuff...

Danny

“What d’ya wanna sell?”

Heroin 0

Coke 0

Ecstasy 0

Acid 5

Weed 0

Downers 0

5/50

DOPE DEMAND

“We wanted to have a drug-dealing minigame in lots of the *GTA* games,” says Houser of what has finally been realised in *Chinatown Wars*. “We played with it a little in *Vice City Stories*, because it worked really well juxtaposed with the main story. It works well with what *GTA* is, with driving around the map, and it gives you another thing to think about – another layer or piece of the puzzle to keep you motivated.”

What this means in real terms is that you can make a ton of cash out of buying and selling six types of drug within the game, gaining experience of market conditions and geographical nuances in order to maximise your profits. “It does intersect with the main story,” explains Houser, “and things you learn from it work with the story, but it mostly runs on its own.”

A DS drug-dealing sim? You know what’s coming.

LOOKING BACK AT - AND TOWARDS THE FUTURE OF - GRAND THEFT AUTO IV



Before we leave Rockstar's HQ, we feel duty bound to talk with Dan Houser (above) about the wider world of *Grand Theft Auto*, and specifically the fourth instalment, on which he and the Rockstar North team are obviously still working as they prepare the first of two episodes of downloadable content, due for release over Xbox Live.

Looking back at the launch of *GTAIV*, what was it like from your perspective?

Nerve-wracking, always nerve-wracking. The bigger the game, the more nerve-wracking. It was a smoother movement from *GTAIII* to *Vice City* to *San Andreas*, and then we hit various political roadbumps in the intervening years, and also we had to deal with a movement on to the new hardware, with technical roadbumps and so on. The challenge in some ways was outside of the process of making a game, in terms of what we do using experts from Microsoft and Sony to come in and work with the hardware – there was the American government and the crap that went on through 2005 to 2007. So I suppose there was more pressure than there was even with *San Andreas*. So the sense of relief when it all went off was even greater.

What's your take on how the game was ultimately received among consumers?

You always get so many opinions. The big thing that we have become aware of, having made any game – since *GTAIII*, really – is that everything you change, someone will love it and someone will hate it. And there's no way you can account for that because you have to change it – you can't just keep making the same thing again and again. But if you keep in mind that we changed things for reasons of integrity, in terms of design, then I think people overall responded amazingly to the game, both in terms of the critics and consumer response. Of course, you get people complaining that this thing or that thing we'd removed was the thing they'd loved most about the previous game, but the numbers of those were smaller than at any time since *GTAIII*, I think. In the world of

message boards you need to have thick skin because you get insane amounts of hatred for anything you do. But at the same time we get insane amounts of love. Of course you get loads of people going: 'You're arseholes!' but so many people just email in and say: 'This game is amazing'. The feedback was incredible. You get concerns with things like the online not working for a few days and people not being able to get a game working, and that's heartbreaking for us because we want everyone to have a smooth experience. We take that stuff as seriously as we possibly can, and make it as good as we can, so problems like that are really upsetting. But, overall, the fanbase seem to like the direction we've taken – they see what we've done and why we've tried to do it.

Has the direction taken by *GTAIV* – with more considerations for realism, and the removal of jetpacks and so on – set a direction for *GTA* as a whole? And is that direction set in stone?

No, not necessarily. We're still figuring out what we're going to do next, because of the downloadable content. I don't think it's set anything in stone, it's just what we did with that game. The idea that the tone was identical from *GTAIII* through to *Vice City* to *San Andreas* to *Liberty City Stories* to *Vice City Stories* is a little bit of revisionist

"THE MASTERPLAN, IF THERE IS ONE, IS TO KEEP EVOLVING AND MAKE THE PERFECT GAME. I DON'T THINK WE EVEN GOT CLOSE TO THAT WITH *GTAIV*"

history. It really wasn't as close or as unified as all that – sometimes even within a game like *San Andreas* the tone moved a lot, and we desperately tried to make that make sense. And we tried to do something different with *GTAIV*, and I think we'll always go with horses for courses as a basis for what works in a game at a moment in time. The masterplan, if there is one, is to keep evolving and make the perfect game, and I don't think we've even got close to that. I think *GTAIV* was as good as we could do at that moment in time. I think it was a really well worked-out game that combined the three elements of what makes *GTA* on a console. On the one hand that's a progressive, tight, action game, with a better targeting system and the amazing physics and bunch of other things that really made the seamlessness of the design feel like it was taken up a level. But then it's also a strong narrative-driven experience that's meant to feel like a movie or a TV show, and I think we set a new benchmark for what we're capable of doing in that regard. And I think the third thing is that it's a digital fantasy world that you go and explore, and we set another



benchmark for ourselves there. The energy we got into that world – whether you're going for a drink in a bar or seeing a busker when you walk down the street – is, I think, as much as we were capable of at that time. And we did that by really going to a granular level with everything and really figuring stuff out – how we got the animation and AI much tighter, for example. And we'd look to do that fundamental stuff if we did another game. And if that game wasn't suited to the tone of *GTAIV*, it wouldn't have that tone.

What can you say about the downloadable content right now? Will it deliver what people are expecting – ie, a bunch of new missions? Or more than that?

[Pauses] I'm trying to think of something to say that's not too bland, because I can't really talk about it. I think it's really cool, and as an overall package there are two episodes, and each episode works on its own, and as a whole it works well. It adds to the experience in a fun way. If you enjoyed *GTAIV*, you'll enjoy it. If you didn't, it will provide some new things for you to not enjoy.

Is there any way that you can track the decisions players made at crucial points during *GTAIV*?

I don't know if it can track exactly those things. I wanted to go through at some point and look at all of those points to get a sense of how people tackled those decisions. What about you – did you kill Darko?

Erm...

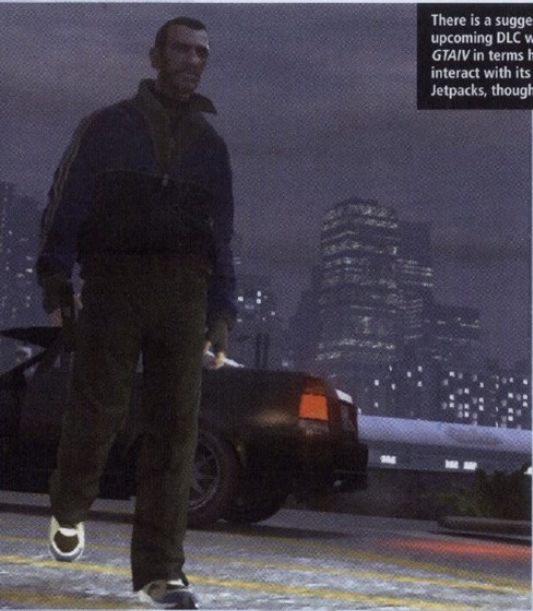
You killed him, didn't you? I can tell from your face.

Completely shot him to pieces, yes.

Interesting. But not everyone did – I know a bunch of people who didn't. So that worked quite well. What about Dimitri?



Houser is pleased with the reaction most gamers had to characters such as Roman, whose relationship with Niko will be further explored soon



There is a suggestion that the upcoming DLC will transform *GTA IV* in terms how you will interact with its vast city. Jetpacks, though? Maybe not

Well, on the first playthrough, Roman died. With Kate, though, it was a matter of being so wrapped up in other activities – she would call to arrange a date and there always seemed to be other things that had to be done. You find yourself reaching the conclusion of the game and you haven't found the opportunity to let her become a big part of your life.

That's amazing that a game can do that, though. That's amazingly gratifying because that's how we want people to respond to it. That's what we wanted it to feel like. A cinematic narrative but giving you things cinema can't, which is choice, and feeling that your actions have influenced outcomes. It's not 'find a key and get through a door', it's more subtle, and there are more inputs than that.

It's almost like event television, in the way you arrive at work and talk with colleagues about what happened last night, except in this case your experiences obviously have the opportunity to be different. We're interested in seeing what happens in this respect when the DLC is rolled out.

So am I. It's like *Chinatown Wars* in that it's something totally new. We've never done anything episodic at all – the only thing we've done remotely similar, I suppose, are the PSP games; new stories in existing worlds, and on a handheld. The idea of sending content down the internet is scary to me in some ways, because I'm old enough to think it's all got to be on a disc. And the same with *Chinatown Wars*, to be fiddling around, doing stuff on a DS and trying a totally new platform, and also working with Nintendo, who we've never really worked with closely before. It's new ground and it'll be interesting. Fun, though. We're not going to get stuck doing the same thing. Everyone seems convinced that the internet is eventually how you'll be distributing your games, and this is our first foray into that, and I think Xbox Live is a great environment to be doing that – they've got a really vibrant community and insanely popular and efficient ways of getting stuff out to people.



DEAD



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DUELLING BANJO

Part Mario, part Meccano, Rare's new game is hard to describe, but a joy to drive

Banjo-Kazooie: Nuts & Bolts is a game about putting things together. With the ideas behind *LittleBigPlanet* and *Spore* already firmly established in the gaming firmament it only seems appropriate that a major Microsoft Game Studios release might go that way as well, but there's another association, too: the relationship between Rare, *Nuts & Bolts*' developer, and its owner. Rare has finally moved from being the piece that didn't quite fit to potentially the most important part of Microsoft's entire jigsaw puzzle.

This is the company that first made FPSes work on consoles, so it's ironic that Microsoft should require its help as it tries to vary its portfolio for a wider audience. While *Grabbed By The Ghoulies* looked out of place on the original Xbox, Xbox 360's recent courting of the mainstream has called for a different kind of game, and Rare, which has already developed

TITLE: BANJO-KAZOOIE: NUTS & BOLTS
FORMAT: 360
PUBLISHER: MICROSOFT
DEVELOPER: RARE
ORIGIN: UK
RELEASE: CHRISTMAS



Marc Betteridge
Studio director



Rich Cousins
Producer



Gregg Mayles
Head of design



Salvatore Filecchia
Lead programmer

the console's new avatars along with the colourful and distinctive *Viva Piñata* (see p100), is probably best placed to deliver it. But if you're thinking that, with Banjo, it's busting out a decade-old mascot in order to play it safe, you couldn't be more wrong.

Advance warning: there's a fair chance that *Nuts & Bolts* may live to be one of the most cruelly misinterpreted games in history. On the surface, the game sees Banjo and Kazooie facing off against long-time enemy Grunty in a series of challenges, the twist this time being a focus on building, riding and upgrading vehicles in order to do so. It's easy to dismiss this as a potentially desperate attempt to revive a flagging platform genre by turning it into a GTA clone for the stuffed-toy crowd, and first impressions suggest that, while there's plenty of charm and self-awareness on display, very little has truly changed beneath the new paint job.

The opening scene manages to poke lots of fun at the ten years that have passed since Banjo last graced the N64, with sly digs at *Ghoulies*, and a few nods to Rare's other recent output. When the game almost immediately presents a path of coins for you to follow, the

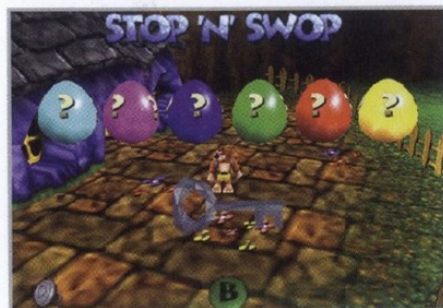


more than a fresh take on Banjo's expanding move-set. His initial ride is a shopping trolley, which will gradually evolve as Banjo finds more vehicle parts throughout the game, each allowing access to a new area. While there's plenty to be happy about – the physics are instantly gratifying, and the vehicles are bouncy and fun to drive – there's a distinct feeling that this may be a case of old ideas in new clothing.

There's still a lot to be said for old ideas,

though, and we're soon off to Nutty Acres for our first few missions. The worlds of *Banjo* are as creative and consistent as you might expect, and this first area is a clumsily stitched patchwork landscape filled with volcanoes and lakes, and while the initial tasks are fetch quests, they're thoughtfully put together – one asks you to take an unexploded bomb to be disarmed, pitting you against the rolling terrain and your fledgling driving skills – and at the end of each, there's a generous wealth of leaderboards, saved films and rewards. Mix in a fine range of objectives, from races and stunts to sports challenges, and *Nuts & Bolts* is starting to look like an enjoyable, if conventional, update. Who knows, there may even be a bit of platforming in there somewhere.

But it's only when you step out of the missions themselves that you realise *Nuts & Bolts* is far from conventional. The story mode is only half the game here, and while *Super Mario 64* may seem like the most obvious connection to make, when you really begin to join the dots together they lead to the territory of *Spore* and *LittleBigPlanet*.



STOP 'N' SWOP

Videogame lore is full of features that never made it into the finished game, but *Stop 'N' Swop* may be the most regularly discussed. *Banjo-Kazooie* featured six collectable eggs and an enigmatic Ice Key, which were rumoured to unlock features in the game's sequel. Whether it's due to hardware changes which meant that swapping – sorry, swooping – cartridges on the final N64 was never viable, or due to Nintendo's uneasiness at having people yank games out of the machine too quickly, the eggs never hatched, but the re-release of *Banjo-Kazooie* on XBLA will see *Stop 'N' Swop* finally make it to players. This time, however, it's *Nuts & Bolts* that reaps the benefits, with each egg unlocked in the XBLA game having an effect on *Showdown Town*. We won't ruin the surprise, but it's a relief to be able to draw a line under at least one internet conversation topic. Now, if only Rare would come clean on *Killer Instinct 3*...

collecting instinct is so hardwired that you're halfway through them before you realise it's an elaborate prank. It's a welcome sign that this most British of developers hasn't lost its sense of humour, while also indicating that it's well aware that *Banjo*'s traditional mechanics can no longer be relied upon. But when Banjo and Grunty are transported to the new hub world of Showdown Town to compete for ownership of Spiral Mountain, doubts quickly settle in again. Showdown Town may be huge and filled with neat designs, but the game's structure – separate worlds offering challenges that, when beaten, open up more worlds where fresh challenges await – is getting on a bit.

And the vehicle emphasis initially seems little

The departure of Chris and Tim Stamper seems to have had little effect on the company's sense of direction. "I've known Tim since I was 14," says Betteridge. "I miss them more on a personal basis than a day-to-day business basis. Obviously we're 200 people strong here, with a lot of people who were trained by Tim and Chris. We've kept that vision – it wasn't a big change, like switching the lights off. We're still going in the same direction"





"There was a time when it was too realistic," says Fileccia. "A lot of time was spent righting a vehicle when it toppled over. Once we got the balance better and the physics friendlier, top-heavy stuff would be stable most of the time until you did something stupid"



Mayles suggests the current focus on creative games is partly down to improvements in technology: "Making something like *Nuts & Bolts* before would have been impossible because of the physics calculations"



Banjo, it turns out, is a Trojan Bear.

Beneath the recognisable characters, *Nuts & Bolts* is actually a physics toy and a construction set as much as a platformer. And vehicles are not a desperate addition, but the carefully crafted hinge on which the entire experience turns: this is a game that encourages you to make things. After that, it encourages you to try them out, share them, fiddle around with things other players have made, and generally lose yourself in the complex and joyful process of iteration. *Banjo-Kazooie* really has moved on from coin hunts, then.

It's a testament to the design that it takes a while for this to become clear, as the vehicle editor – the key to truly understanding the game – is as shallow or as deep as you'd like it to be. When you're initially introduced to Mumbo's Motors, where all your construction will take place, it's with the simple agenda of slapping the most basic kart together: a seat, some wheels,

a motor and some fuel. Complete in ten seconds, it seems like an enjoyable, if unnecessary, distraction. And while the game revolves around the player collecting parts and building bespoke vehicles for the needs of each specific challenge, many people will spend mere minutes in here, fudging the most basic vehicle for each objective – whacking on a scoop for the coconut collector, or a propeller for a flying race.

But others may spend years in the vehicle

"I wouldn't be surprised if some people ignore the main game almost entirely," suggests Mayles. "They'll just spend hours building things, making them look right, and showing their friends what they've built. If people want to play that way, that's great"

(each element has noticeable effects, and proves crucial in getting those top-level awards). Others still will be truly creative, such as the Rare tester who built a two-part vehicle: a booster with rockets which, at the end of the ramp, fires detachable bolts (just one of the varied pieces available) and launches a spherical cabin containing Banjo right across the map. And then there are the wildcards, such as another tester who went in completely the opposite direction, building a vehicle that actually looked like a ski-jumper, a top-heavy monster which wobbled on narrow wheels and spring-mounted skis, before tipping over at the bottom of the ramp and falling to pieces.



The game revolves around the player collecting parts and building bespoke vehicles for each specific challenge



editor, experimenting with the parts and evolving their designs, because *Nuts & Bolts* lets you build anything you want, regardless of how suited it is for the task at hand.

Take the long-jump challenge. Many will simply add wings and rockets to their existing karts. Others will go deeper, factoring in the weight of blocks, and the aerodynamic shape

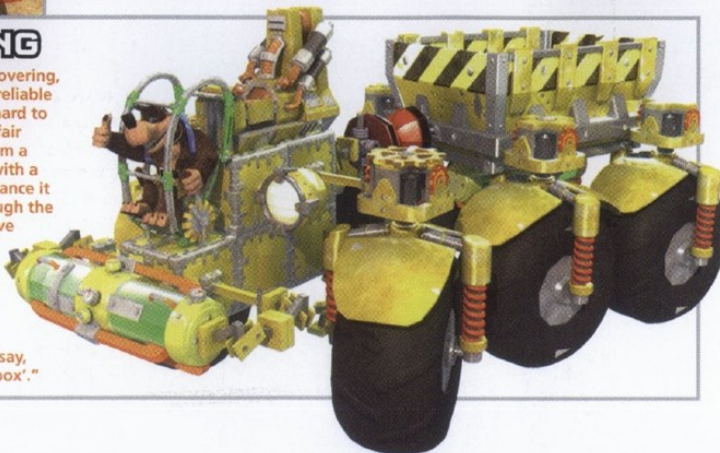


It's the kind of creativity some players will find intoxicating, but it requires a reliable and intuitive editor, and Mumbo's Motors is something the developers have spent a long time working on. "There's no secret to making a good editor," sighs **Gregg Mayles**, Rare's head of design, and the lead on *Nuts & Bolts*. "It's just iteration. When I started this job, I thought the editor would be six months, and that was being pessimistic. It turned out to be a whole project. An editor is just a barrier between what the player wants and the finished item. Our job is to try and make that barrier as small as possible, so the player can go from a thought to seeing it in the game as quickly as possible."

"The most daunting thing for people is the very first time," says **Rich Cousins**, the game's producer. "All these bits, this big empty area – what do I do?" A selection of pre-built chassis are there for players who feel overwhelmed, but Rare has done its work well, and, sitting down with the level editor, even with a dizzying assortment of potential parts unlocked, it's far more tempting to select a set of wheels and work from scratch.

WHEEL BALANCING

As *Media Molecule* and *Maxis* are also discovering, giving players such powerful toolsets and reliable physics means the games quickly become hard to balance. How do you ensure that a race is fair when players can compete on anything from a rocket-powered spaceship to a toboggan with a few balloons attached? "We've tried to balance it for people who are just going to play through the games and collect the Jiggys, but then we've rebalanced it for the people on top of that, who will want to make hundreds of vehicles and replay everything," says Mayles. "But you can't think of everything the player's going to do," adds Cousins. "That's actually the fun of it. People in test say, 'I won by breaking the game', and we say, 'No, that's good. You thought outside the box'."



All the vehicles truly require is a seat for Banjo, wheels, an engine and fuel – and even the last part's negotiable, with balloon-based propulsion systems available. All items are located on menus, ready to be dragged into place, and the journey between build and test is a button press. Starting by spacing out four wheels, it's a simple matter to bolt blocks together connecting them into a frame, add a seat, stick three or four engines on (each engine will give you more power, but will make you heavier) and then stick on incidentals – some pointless, like fluffy dice, some vehicle-definingly brilliant, like wings or flotation devices, which allow you to take to the skies or explore the game's lakes and rivers.

And the variety that you can produce quickly becomes evident. Our first effort was an ugly, boomerang-framed quad bike with monster-truck wheels, and a cockpit that hung dangerously low under the chassis. For our second attempt we were more experimental, creating a long, straight frame and bunching balloons at one end of it. When they were inflated in the test arena, it rose into the air and dangled there uselessly, until we discovered we could coax it gently around the space by inflating and deflating the balloons quickly.

Once a vehicle's built, it's stored in the form of a blueprint, and can be brought out whenever an objective requires it. Blueprints are generated automatically, and can be exchanged online. You can even take pictures of other people's vehicles and, providing they haven't locked the blueprint to prevent theft, you'll be able to recreate it at the push of a button, and then get to work tinkering with it yourself.

The complexity of the vehicles requires reliable physics, as the pleasure of making something is only equal to how believably it



Mayles: "During development, I told the artist if he drew any decent graphics I'd take them out. When we got to six people making ugly little vehicles, driving them and having fun, I thought: we've got something"



If you suffer a nasty collision, parts will break off your vehicle, affecting its handling in a realistic manner. Less realistically, a squeeze of a button will suck them back on



handles in the gameworld. "We got real physics in early," says lead programmer **Salvatore Fileccia**. "But you needed a degree in engineering to build anything. So the most difficult part is getting that cartoon physics working. You want people to build failures and have fun, but you also want people who don't understand the laws of physics to build something that doesn't fall over."

"It's fun physics," suggests Cousins. "There's layers of fun, so people can quickly build a vehicle or strip it down for weight, add four-wheel drive, and add propellers that suck or blow."

While it's a pleasure to see Banjo lining up alongside *LittleBigPlanet* and *Spore* as the push for creative gaming continues, it's still something of a shock that Rare should take such a risk with valuable IP.

The truth is, it had to. "We started off going down a very traditional road, but we realised we'd be aiming for a smaller and smaller audience," says Mayles. "I don't think

we could have done the same old thing. Now, the initial reaction may be: 'What have you done to Banjo?' But once people give it a chance, the majority of people may change their opinion."

"Nostalgia's great, and you'll see a lot of nostalgia in Banjo, but you can't use it as a building block for your product," agrees studio director **Mark Betteridge**. "You've got to look for bigger audiences. Selling to the same people is great, but we need more people."

That's a problem that comes up several times during our visit to Rare, and seems to play heavily on the developer's mind, particularly as it celebrates its 25th anniversary. When asked if the studio initially had a hard time adapting to life inside Microsoft, with the departure of founders Tim and Chris Stamper, and games like *Ghoulies* sticking out as oddities against a backdrop of FPSes, Betteridge appears philosophical: "It's difficult to expand a userbase with just one or two products. Now there's other thirdparty things like *Lego Star Wars* so there's more success in that area. The platform's settled more and is expanding, and that suits us better. I don't have any doubt we could make an FPS again, but I don't know what that would give Microsoft other than another product in an area where they've already got lots of products. It's not going to expand the userbase or define the platform. That's where we're going now."



PROTOTYPE

Rare may have cancelled more projects than many other developers, but its flexible approach to product development allows it to explore options other companies couldn't take risks on. Betteridge: "The way a lot of people make mistakes about development now is they start with a team too big – a dozen people might be too big – they'll have to find something for them to do, so they go off into the woods of development, before they've found the killer part that makes it all worthwhile. When we started on the core idea for Banjo, we purposefully had no artists on the team whatsoever. The art was drawn by a programmer in his lunch hour when he was eating his sandwiches. It's about focusing on whether this is any good. We don't need flashy graphics and polish – we need polished gameplay. We cycle around that until we think we've got it and we should move forward, or we haven't got it, and we should do something else."





"Getting to 25 in the entertainment business is a lifetime. The same emphasis is still with us today – attention to detail and a sense of humour that's unique, sometimes too unique, some may argue, but that isn't going to change," says Betteridge

As all this talk of growing the market suggests, Rare is a company with an increasingly strong sense of direction. "We're probably getting more into our stride with the 360 now," continues Betteridge. "There's a definite shift of focus from Microsoft. To get more than 20 or 30 million units, we really need to do something different, and now's the time. The 360 has a fantastic number of high-quality core games. What we need to do is expand for people who are not even in the market for videogames yet. They're the people we need to get us to 100 million units. We've done some fairly unique products in the past, with a different way of thinking, and we're not afraid to stop something that's not working. We want to make products in an area where we define the rules."

And so, if *Nuts & Bolts* is anything to go by, the next 25 years of Rare are going to be interesting. "In terms of where computer entertainment is going in the future, there are avenues that haven't even been tapped yet,"

or three hours a day on there. Who would have thought that would be such a massive time-draw on people? Every now and then a product comes from leftfield and redefines the rules and nobody sees it coming. That's the job of firstparties. The risk of making that would be too high for thirdparty."

That's not to say Rare is entirely turning its back on the past, though. Before we leave, we get a chance to look at the original *Banjo-Kazooie*, which is making its way to Xbox Live Arcade following the November release of *Nuts & Bolts*, its graphics and platforming having aged far better than many N64 titles, especially under the unforgiving glare of HD. Along with the eventual appearance of the fabled Stop 'N' Swop functionality (see 'Stop 'n' swop'), Rare also reveals that its sequel will join it in 2009.

Innovation and tradition, then: two qualities that define *Nuts & Bolts* and may say a fair amount about the studio that's making it. It's a difficult path to tread, but if Rare can win people over to its vision of old IP in new configurations, then Microsoft may have a chance at taking on Nintendo at its own game. There's no doubting that there's a big task ahead, but the rewards could be enormous and, as the name suggests, companies like this don't come along every day.



"We're going to have flying genitalia," says Cousins, worryingly. "Our testers have already made them." Mayles agrees: "It's impossible to police. We put the tools in so, if you want, you can only accept vehicles from your friends"



QUEEN OF THE KNOLL

Rare has taken a typically humorous approach to many multiplayer classics with *Nuts & Bolts*, but the inventiveness goes far deeper than renaming King of the Hill. As expected, vehicles play a major role, and with the ability to create anything you want, chances are the oversize football and basketball games on offer are going to change noticeably over time, as new strategies and designs spread across the internet. And with over 20 game types, and the ability to cue up complex playlists, Rare may be providing the perfect creative counterpoint to much of Xbox Live's focus on destruction.



"You'll see some things from Rare that are outside the normal remit of what computer entertainment should be"

says Betteridge, enigmatically, when asked about new projects. "You'll see some things from Rare that are outside the normal remit of what computer entertainment should be." When pressed further, he suggests: "It's fascinating the amount of time people spend on Facebook; it's just a forum for sharing information and photos. That's the ultimate user-generated content. You put the system in and people literally spend two



"The size limit is 19 blocks by 19 by 19," says Mayles. "People have got round that by building things in parts. Everyone built a piece of a giant robot once. It didn't move, but looked cool"





PLAYSTATION 3

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ALL THE WAY TO 11

RANDY SMITH DISCUSSES ROCK AND ROLLS WITH OLD FRIEND **GREG LOPICCOLO**

In the fall of 1997 the phone rang on **Greg LoPiccolo's** desk at Looking Glass Studios, the game design boutique in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and the guy on the other end of that call was me, **Randy Smith** (left). LoPiccolo (right) was the project lead of the game that would eventually be titled *Thief*, and soon afterwards he gave me my first job in the industry. The day *Thief's* gold master was approved, LoPiccolo announced he was leaving for Harmonix Music Systems to take the helm as director (now VP) of product development. Over the past ten years, he has played a central role in guiding Harmonix, step by step, through a series of games whose highlights include the runaway success of *Guitar Hero* all the way through to the highly anticipated release of *Rock Band 2*. Join me as I talk with one of my biggest role models and mentors about the patient, bold and highly focused creative vision behind Harmonix.

COMPLICATED GAMES FOR COMPLICATED PEOPLE

How did you get involved in Harmonix?

A couple of Looking Glass employees had moved over to Harmonix. I had been a musician before getting into the games industry and was excited to move back in that direction. *Thief* was creatively super rewarding, but it was a brutal death march. I had a family and small children, so that lifestyle was not compatible with my personal goals.

What was your earlier career as a musician like?

I played bass in a band called Tribe. We never made the national stage, but we were a prominent Boston band in the late '80s and early '90s. We got to tour with The Psychedelic Furs, we were on Conan the first month the show was on the air, and we opened for Pixies and Throwing Muses.

What did you think about working at Looking Glass?

Looking Glass had a ton of intellectual ferment. They had a very clear understanding that this was a medium whose boundaries could be expanded, and they were going to be the people to do it. All kinds of ambitious things were being attempted in different domains, and there was very little process. It was very chaotic, and they were figuring it out on the fly.

It's worth noting that Looking Glass tended to produce sophisticated gaming experiences that appealed most to people who could get through the barrier to entry.

That was something the staff was aware of. To a great degree, it was in the DNA of the place: complicated people making complicated experiences. I think *Thief* was actually pretty accessible compared to some of the stuff we'd done before. I certainly took away that to be commercially successful you needed to make games



THE LONG ROAD TO ROCK BAND

How Harmonix pulled together the lessons learned from its catalogue of games to create its latest hit



Frequency showed the early origins of Harmonix's track-based beat-matching and power-up-fuelled gameplay



Karaoke Revolution demonstrated technical expertise at pitch recognition, and placed characters front and centre



Tuning the balance of competitive and then co-op multiplayer, on different instruments, was a crucial step



Finally, the famous suite of peripherals perform the essential task of binding the rock star fantasy to reality

that people are actually able to play, and I came away with a strong respect for the importance of process, of actually shoving stuff out the door.

What was Harmonix like the day you walked in the door?

We had this high-level directive that the founders, Alex and Eran, had concocted to which we've remained true to this day, and that was to use technology to allow non-musicians to experience music. We believe music is this incredible human joy which is denied to most people because they don't have a decade or more to put

"WE WANTED TECHNOLOGY TO CUT OUT THE LEARNING CURVE AND PLUG PEOPLE RIGHT IN TO THE AWESOME EXPERIENCE"

into mastering a conventional instrument. So we wanted to use technology to cut out the huge learning curve and plug people right in to the awesome experience.

What was the first game you settled on, and why?

We settled on something that ended up being *Frequency*. I had a half-baked idea from my Looking Glass days about a cyberspace world with a musical component where you would zoom through and interact with data. We looked at the beat-matching gameplay we saw in games like *Parappa* and thought: 'How can we turn this into an immersive 3D experience and make the gameplay a little deeper?'

How did it turn out?

My sense is that the gameplay was pretty decent, but we learned some hard lessons about how to present that sort of thing to a mass audience. It was really opaque. Serious gamers who could grasp the mysterious interface got a lot of enjoyment out of it, but it was hard to market.

YOU CAN'T LET THE PERFECT BE THE ENEMY OF THE GOOD

At the same time it's easy to look at *Frequency* and see some of the initial DNA of the later Harmonix games such as *Guitar Hero* and *Rock Band*.

Yeah, totally. A lot of the interface specifics and gameplay concepts are inspired by those early titles. *Amplitude* was an attempt to fix all the problems in *Frequency* and make something more accessible. We had a spaceship, it shot energy...

So the player could identify with an avatar as opposed to a total abstraction?

Yes, but looking back on it, it was not terribly coherent. We were treating the symptoms, just *Band Aiding*. Sony really pushed on us hard. They said: "Look, we'll fund a sequel because we think your concept is good, but you've got to put characters in it", and we thought: 'But that compromises our precious vision!'

How did it compromise your vision to put a character in the game?

We had intentionally made the interface abstract. We had an approach where form follows function and it's all got to be beautifully integrated. Even in *Rock Band* there's something inherently messy about the visual design: we render this beautiful scene, and then we slap a huge HUD on. In *Amplitude*, we took a small step with those

little avatars who would dance and switch from drums to guitar, but they weren't well enough realised to have any emotional beat, and they were off in the corner!

They were a postage stamp.

Yes, and as anyone who has played a rhythm-action game knows, you look at the 'now bar' and six inches above that, and that's all you can deal with. We resisted the whole idea of characters because we couldn't think of an elegant way to integrate them that did justice to the core concept.



Despite courting the mainstream with a flat playing field and more structured visuals, *Amplitude* still had an ear for tunes with indie credentials and universal appeal. Ditto *Guitar Hero*

So the concept behind *Frequency* and *Amplitude* is that the interface for playing the game – the HUD, the notes, and the sight-reading stream – was the world you lived in?

Yes, exactly, the idea was that everything in the world was either eye-candy or directly relevant to the play surface and that we would get a lot of power and occasional clarity out of keeping that consistent. But people couldn't relate to it. The thing we didn't realise is that you can't let the perfect be the enemy of the good. We solved that problem by getting out of our own way when we went on to create the *Karaoke* games [for Konami].

THE CORE IS CRUCIAL, AND NOTHING ELSE IS CRUCIAL

How did you wind up getting *Karaoke Revolution*?

Konami of America contacted us. They had an internal team working on it, but it all fell apart. We started *Karaoke Revolution* in January, targeting an August or September gold master. It was a super-tight development cycle, but we were coming off our second commercial failure with *Amplitude*, so we were grateful to have an opportunity to explore a different direction.

Did you find such a short development cycle forced you to make better decisions quicker?

Yeah, absolutely. We learned valuable lessons from all those *Karaoke* and *Guitar Hero* cycles. [Upon hearing the words 'Guitar Hero', an adolescent girl turns around in her seat and stares at Greg silently. His back is turned, so he doesn't notice.] It was crucial in each case that we ship on time, as we were making the kind of titles that had to make Christmas. We got better at being ruthless about feature sets. We would cut early and mercilessly. The thing is, it's so tempting to add more stuff. It takes so long to develop the insight that anything you can think of has the potential to be three or

four times as hard as you think it should be. The *Karaoke* games instilled this discipline in us which was like: is this essential for the mission? No? Then it's gone. We all shared this belief that the core is crucial, and nothing else is crucial. That worked for us through *Karaoke* and all the sequels. We added only a couple of features each time. When we rolled around to *Guitar Hero*, it was the same thing. We started in January and were shipping for Christmas. If you go back and play that game now, it's stripped. It's a minimal game.

How did you transition from *Karaoke Revolution* to *Guitar Hero*?

Red Octane approached us and said: "We have the ability to make peripherals in China, and we're a publisher. Would you be interested in making a guitar game if we make a guitar peripheral?" We said yes, but we want it to be about rock guitar. Very early on we had this contention that this will be cool, but it'll be more cool if you're like wailing on rock guitar [demonstrates with appropriately righteous air guitar moves] and you're like: power! And like it's gonna be great to be a kick-ass rock guitarist!

STAYING IN THE GAME

Did *Guitar Hero* bring together a bunch of the elements that you had been working on?

There were these little evolutions that all converged. We had the 3D beat-matching experience from *Frequency* and

Amplitude, the character creator and presentation from *Karaoke Revolution*, and the peripheral experience. The key design insight was that to glue it in the player's mind you had to solve this aspirational problem: they had to know what kind of musician they were. *Karaoke Revolution* worked great because people already knew what karaoke was, and the game part was pretty modest. We just graded your singing. The mic was intuitive for people to use, and it let people know

Guitar Hero was originally developed by Harmonix, but it's Activision's series. *World Tour*, the latest sequel, is out soon



who they were: 'I'm a singer'. This sounds simple, but it was a huge insight for us. The guitar peripheral solved the same problem: 'I'm a guitarist'.

What was your first taste of the experience that would be *Guitar Hero*?

We built an early prototype and had done up a couple covers of famous rock songs just to see how it felt. We tried it and thought, 'This is great!' So we built it out and iterated on it. We found there was a lot you could do to make it feel more like playing guitar, like sustains, vibrato and chords. Once we had our five or six things, we really felt it was solid.

Right around *Guitar Hero*, Harmonix shifted from being a barely known software developer doing interesting musical things to being a cultural phenomenon. How did that feel?

It was really fun! It was very validating for us because we all had this philosophy about staying in the game long enough to get our turn to bat. It was our ambition to stay alive for long enough to...

...to strike a cultural nerve?

Well, of whatever size. I don't think anybody could reasonably expect one that size, including us. We had all thought *Frequency* was going to be huge. We loved it, and we thought it was going to break out and sell a million copies, and then it didn't. When *Guitar Hero* shipped we were thinking: 'We love this game. This game is awesome. We love the vibe, and it's really fun'. So we had a lot of confidence in the title, but we certainly weren't making any predictions.

THE DECISION TO GO FOR IT
Did having developed a couple of *Guitar Heroes* put Harmonix

"WE HAD ALL THOUGHT FREQUENCY WAS GOING TO TO BREAK OUT AND SELL A MILLION COPIES, AND THEN IT DIDN'T"

in a position to drive your own decisions about what you wanted to go after next?

Yes. We had enough financial stability to fund our own development without every dime going right into the next milestone. So we started R&D on *Rock Band*. We really wanted to go there, and we knew it was going to be hard. In particular, the drums were a new peripheral with new gameplay. Also, we knew band gameplay was going to be a beast.

How long did it take to produce *Rock Band*, from start to finish?

Depends on where you measure the start, but you could call it close to 20 months.

I remember being at your GDC presentation about two years ago, and a guy in the audience described a game in which someone would be playing guitar, someone else bass, someone else drums, and a singer, and he asked: "Have you ever thought of that?" Your succinct answer was: "That's occurred to us, yes. Next question". How far off had you seen *Rock Band* coming?

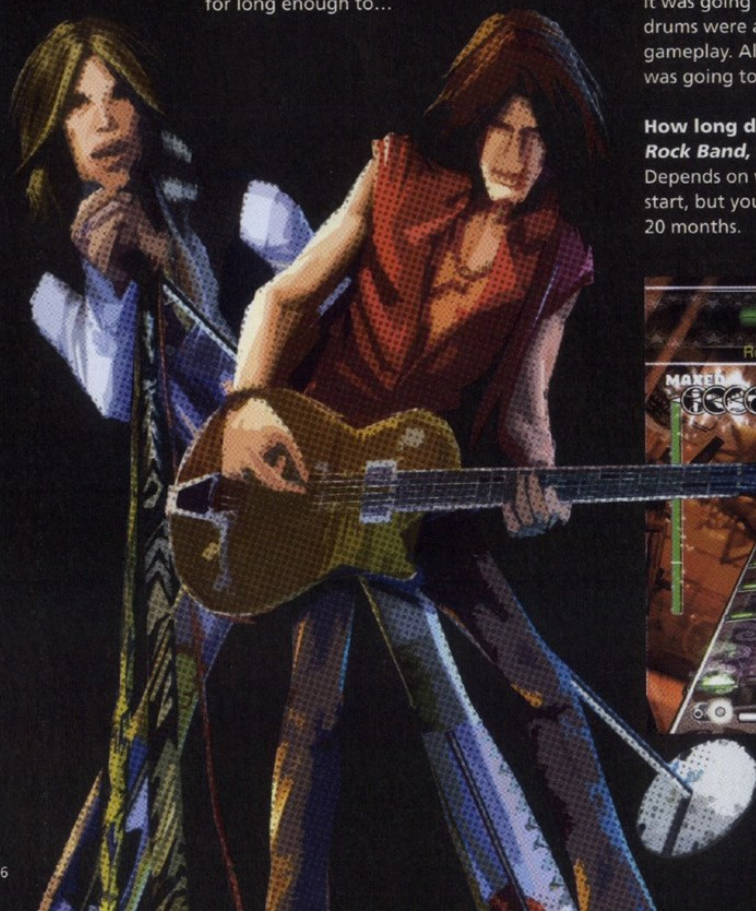
I totally don't remember. To me it seems like

one of those design ideas that's implicit. I don't think anybody deserves huge credit for coming up with it. It's like, duh, if you already make singing and guitar games... To me, if there's any major breakthrough, it was the decision to go for it.

As in: we have a business plan that we feel could possibly succeed?

Yeah, because think about it: let's make a game where we sell this big box of stuff that costs \$170... [laughs]

But for some reason everyone is going to buy it and play it anyway. Hey, it's not that hard to get people into it. You just have to have four friends who all want to play music games, are willing



To create *Rock Band*, Harmonix leveraged the tech, design and dev best practices it evolved over seven years of music work



Streamlining never makes everyone happy. The loss of *Frequency*'s tunnel in follow-up *Amplitude* came as an unpleasant surprise to its hardcore fans, the ability to pass effortlessly between tracks seen as key to its hypnotic trance

to take turns on different instruments, and have enough expertise that they can sight-read new songs, that's all!

Yeah, what's the problem? You just have to source components from four or five different factories and bundle them all together in China, put them in boxes, then put them on boats. What could go wrong?

BEAT-MATCHING IS NOT THE BE-ALL AND END-ALL OF MUSIC GAMING

So how do you feel about *Rock Band*?

I feel great about it. For me personally one of the most fun aspects of E3 this year was watching people play. They see the sign, they walk in, they strap the controller on, and they're in the song in 15 seconds. Everyone appears to have played this game. It seems to have entered the vernacular. That made me happy, because it's kind of a complicated game.

How would you attribute that success? If you show *Frequency* to that same group of people today, they're going to be baffled. Is it the longterm investment in those game concepts, or is it all the work you did to make them approachable and presentable?

I think it was incremental. Clearly *Guitar Hero* was a breakthrough. It was accessible enough to let people in, and once you're there it's not a huge perceptual jump to the drums and the vocals, even if you've never played *Karaoke Revolution*. Another key thing is that we had a lot of evangelists, people who got there early and flogged their friends into it. I've had the same holiday experience that a lot of people have had, where you break it out at Christmas

and all your cousins are like: "Let me try. This is awesome!" It's this great communal experience that people are willing to come back to.

In that sense do you feel like Harmonix has met its vision?

No, I think it's a waystation. I think we've made some significant strides. People feel like they are musicians, and they are deriving a lot of entertainment and emotional satisfaction out of it. That's a big deal. The thing that they're not doing that we would love for them to do is actually make musical decisions with musical consequences and gameplay consequences.

So you've been pushing on this concept of interactive music?

Yes, we envision a musical vocabulary where you're not playing along to someone else's music, you're actually authoring it. All the senior folks at Harmonix are mesmerised by that goal, but we also have a realistic sense of how difficult it will be to achieve. We've had a couple cracks at it from different angles. But the answer is no, we have a long way to go. Beat-matching is not the be-all, end-all of music gaming. We would like to do some other things, and we also hope that other people will do some other things. It's exciting that music games are getting green-lit. We're hoping that other cool stuff will come out of other people's minds, stuff that we wouldn't have thought of.

Are you still a musician?

I still try to play. Mostly I play with my kids.

You play music with your kids, or you play *Rock Band* with your kids?

I play music. My son and all his sixth-grade friends have instruments. We played the school picnic, which was awesome. It was this whole punk thing. Ramones, Sex Pistols, Pixies.

What do you play in the band?

I sit in the back and play bass.

Who's the drummer?

My son Sam.

What's his drumming level?

Between medium and hard. If he applied himself, he could crush hard.



THE FUTURE OF MUSIC GAMES

Harmonix wants you to write your own music. LoPiccolo reviews a handful of its previous experiments



MUSIC CREATOR MODE IN FREQUENCY AND AMPLITUDE

"We pushed the envelope pretty hard in terms of how far you could take it on the PS2, and I'm proud of that"



FREESTYLE SECTIONS IN FREQUENCY AND AMPLITUDE

"One of our earliest attempts. I totally fought for that, but I don't even know if anybody liked it"



IMPROVISATIONAL SOLOS IN GUITAR HERO

"At best moments it was awesome, but usually sounded bad. We didn't have time to iterate, so we cut them"



DRUM FILLS IN ROCK BAND

"A little freedom is fun, but there is insufficient gameplay meaning. We'd like choice to have more consequence"



ALTERED STATE

In little over a decade, the mod scene has evolved from a handful of hobbyists to a vital pool of talent and ideas. But what lies in store?

It can turn *Unreal Tournament* into a sky-bound cel-shaded adventure, the tropical thunder of *Far Cry* into Fritz Lang-inspired art cinema, a gun into a blade, a deathmatch into a platform game, and a bedroom hobby into a lifelong career. Yet, 17 years after *The Bard's Tale Construction Set* and almost a decade after *Quake III Arena*, there's one image the mod community still has trouble changing – its own.

To some, the 'art' of carving one game (or one system) out of another is nothing less than

a crucible for tomorrow's triple-A hits, building the talent, vision and prototypes that big-name publishers need. To others, it ranks alongside recreational benchmarking as just another of PC gaming's peculiar habits. Despite the commercial graduation of teams and the interest of two million monthly visitors to Mod DB, the scene's largest online portal, old stereotypes remain: untextured gun models in the backs of



Warm Gun brings to mind *Enemy Territory: Quake Wars* with its diverse, story-laden locations. Sadly, top-end mods like this can both live and die by the quality of their art and map design, their high profiles simply increasing the chances of team members being poached by the industry. For the moment, at least, Warm Gun's developer blog speaks more of new recruits than departures



magazines; 'total conversions' that convert, totally, the knitwear on a terrorist's head; cyberpunk 'dystopias' that, by some kind of mirror-shade-overflow error, crash your computer.

"Like any user-generated content, it's the signal-to-noise ratio," explains *Unreal Tournament* producer **Jeff Morris**. "For example, we spend a lot of time on the first 15 minutes of a game, that first play session that's gonna determine whether there's a second or a third. People who get into mods have the same threshold. If the first five mods they download crash their machine, look stupid or aren't fun, they're gonna say: 'These kids are just screwing around'. I understand that, but I think those people just got burned – they didn't know how to read the topography of the community and know, for instance, that there's a site that rates every map. Maybe they browsed to a forum and clicked the first five links that they saw."

There are, at present, over 4,000 mods hosted on Mod DB, half considered 'finished', half not, covering everything from the humble 'mutator' (a clutch of scripts that tweaks existing features) to maps and

WE ARE THE FANCY MODS

This list of recommendations from the kind folk at Mod DB is meant, says Reismanis, to show the breadth of today's mod scene, not necessarily its quality. Not everything fits the classic categories of maps, scripts and total conversions, today's modding tools almost as flexible as the code on which they're built. In modding circles, little sells itself better than an inconceivable pairing of subject matter and source material. For a more thorough overview, there's always last year's Mod Of The Year Top 100 (snipurl.com/2vkza).



ETERNAL SILENCE (HALF-LIFE 2)

Merging FPS and space combat to better effect than *Mace Griffin: Bounty Hunter*, this 2006 mod by Crankshaft Games boasts railgun projectiles 'the size of buses' and 'battlefields as large as 32,768km'. Destroying capital ships inside and out is the multiplayer objective, the game's universe expanding via a regularly updated novella. Chances of actual silence seem slim. www.moddb.com/mods/eternal-silence



PARANOIA (HALF-LIFE)

This Russian effort has a *Stalker* vibe and soundtrack by Moscow nu-metal band Slot. Not many games claim 'impossible' visuals, but it does have a point: *Half-Life*'s tech comes from the first *Quake*. Here, it shines projected lights on bump-mapped surfaces. Quizzed about its brutal anti-terrorist theme, its author rather worryingly answers: "It is our reality." www.moddb.com/mods/paranoia



AGE OF CHIVALRY (HALF-LIFE 2)

Never let it be said that modders feel bound by the games they work with. A medieval multiplayer game that promises sieges, town raids and 'open war', *Age Of Chivalry* has already seen games of over 100 players. The numbers, says Team Chivalry, which also include three million player minutes per month, eclipse those of commercial games like *The Ship* and *Dark Messiah*. www.moddb.com/mods/age-of-chivalry



WHEELS OF WAR (ENEMY TERRITORY: QUAKE WARS)

'Like *Carmageddon?* Love Wheels Of War!' reads the summary. Power-ups, zombies, stunts and upgrades are promised, the megatextured landscapes of *Quake Wars* meaning vast, free-roaming events. Players can visit the Carnegie Council Ministry For Statistics (wheelsofwar.colsoft.biz/stats) to gauge just how much of the above they're talking about. www.moddb.com/mods/wheels-of-war



Split into four phases, Make Something Unreal offers a \$1m prize purse shared between its winners and runners-up. Achievements are recognised in art, machinima, level design, vehicle design and use of physics, the major prizes going to complete games. Additional categories are reserved for educational entrants, as Epic is keen to stress the wide adoption of Unreal Engine 3 by colleges and universities.

Since its launch in 1998, Unreal has been increasingly positioned at the centre of the modding

your tech figured out by the time you embark on your game, but that definitely was not the case with Unreal Engine 2 or 3. There's a lot of risk associated with going into production with artists, content creators and programmers going all out before you have your technology synched up. The advantage is being able to communicate so easily with the technology team. Rather than having specifications delivered to us that may or may not meet our needs, we can make requests and tailor everything to suit. And that's not just something we enjoy. We have mailing lists where everyone who licenses or uses our engine can ask questions to our core engine team, and to the content creators on games like *Gears* or *Unreal Tournament*.

"The challenge today for the mod teams, especially the ones familiar with UE2-era tech, is to re-implement everything. A lot of them were of the perception that, if it was in Unreal Engine 2, a simple Ctrl+V would put it in Unreal Engine 3. Nothing could be farther from the truth. So the first of four

"These days, hundreds of games have SDKs, and hundreds of sites cover the scene, not to mention a billion blogs. To me, that's information overload"

total conversions. For founder **Scott Reismanis**, who built the site as Mod Realm in 1998, Morris touches a nerve. The mod scene, obsessed as it is with the language of alphas and betas, has found its own move to 'version 2.0' particularly hard. "These days, hundreds of games have SDKs, and hundreds of sites cover the scene, not to mention a billion blogs," he says. "To me, that's information overload. Everything wants everyone's attention now. It's hard to get anyone interested beyond the couple of minutes it takes to watch a web video, which smokes us more important than ever before."

Part of the problem, believes Morris and his colleagues at Epic Games, is the lack not just of filtering for the worst mods, but platforms for the best. To this end *Unreal Tournament*, the virtual deathmatch, has spawned some very real champions through its Make Something Unreal contest, now in its third year. Morris admits: "Half the mods probably aren't worth playing, and it's really hard to know which ones aren't what we call 'DM-Cube' – you know, just a basic box map but with lights, geometry and a sexy name. So that's where we can help."

universe, which in turn has meant placing modding at the centre of Unreal. This, says Morris, is not without its problems. "Ideally, you'd already have



Awarded ModDB's Indie Game Of The Year award for 2007, *Beyond The Red Line*, a standalone *Battlestar Galactica* mod built on *Freespace 2* tech, is markedly better than any of the official tie-ins



DIPRIP
(HALF-LIFE 2)
Exor Studios twists some metal to create a familiar kind of post-apocalyptic road rage. Planned game types include deathmatch, team deathmatch and capture the flag, the team responding quickly to initial fears over some rather clunky handling. A 'money for damage' system hopes to fill the dual weapon mounts on each car.
www.moddb.com/mods/diprip



FIRST STRIKE
(BATTLEFIELD 2142)
And you thought you'd waged enough 'famous battles of Star Wars' after two of Pandemic's *Battlefront* games, three *Rogue Squadrons*, *X-Wings*, *TIE Fighters*, and *X-Wing Vs TIE Fighters*. The search for the definitive Hoth goes on, arguably with greater success than any of the aforementioned examples. Other venues include the Death Star surface and Tatooine.
www.moddb.com/mods/first-strike



THE DELTA SECTOR
(FAR CRY)
Widely accused (jokingly) of being CryEngine 2 in disguise, PlatinumGold's shooter dials a four-year-old game way beyond its perceived limits. Hardly a revolution for its plot – you're a special forces soldier sent to eastern Europe in response to a military 'accumulation' – it certainly breaks new ground in the floating, swaying stuff department.
www.moddb.com/mods/the-delta-sector



MIND
(DOOM 3)
You could argue that *Prey* ticked the box marked 'Doom 3 with portals', but it would take a Fagin to play down this effort from Neurological. Exquisite cel-shading, deliciously abstract geometry, and a weapon trio of fists, flares (the trousers, presumably) and telekinesis add a vital air of distinction. Shame a release date has yet to join the screenshots.
www.moddb.com/mods/mind



PORTAL: THE FLASH VERSION
(PORTAL)
It's the old story: mod becomes game, game becomes 2D Flash port, 2D Flash port is modded back into game which previously was a mod. Obviously, the 2D version by 'Valve fanboys' Hen Mazolski and Ido Tal needed new puzzles, this mod interpreting all 40 of them back into the 3D original, adding a few new ones along the way.
www.moddb.com/games/portal/downloads/portal-the-flash-version-mappack

phases [of Make Something Unreal] closes today, and I'm sure the rest of my day's going to comprise panicked emails saying: 'Oh my god, I can't upload anything!' That's the striking thing about the mod community: how similar they are to professional game developers. They leave it to the last minute."

By describing the community in the plural rather than singular Morris makes an important, if unintended, point. As much as technology and ambition drive the mod scene to become more like the game industry, dividing its teams into recognisable roles like concept art and PR, it is not the game industry. It's people, some bound by a shared vision – to make a *Battlestar Galactica* game that's actually good, for example, or revive the *MechWarrior* franchise through *Crysis* – but more often by a very personal desire for a 'proper' job. For those with the mind and talent to be noticed, the opportunities have never been greater.

"We spend so much time sorting out visas because, if you live in the United States and you're functionally literate with the Unreal Engine 3 editor, then you've got a job in the game business,"

declares Morris. "We've had to get a lot of guys from Germany and such because they're the only ones who've got the talent and haven't already been gobbled up. It used to be that, if you were a mod guy making pretty good shit, you'd have a pretty good chance. Now, the demand is so high, levels taking so long to build, that all you need for an entry-level job are the basics."

No exaggeration? "Really – there are enough hungry studios out there. And if they're doing triple-A-style games, their level design department could be 40-50 people. The headcount on \$100m games is just through the roof. I mean, I got into the industry doing QA at Origin Systems, which was a great experience but really not my passion. These days, enough games have modding kits that you can bypass traditional ways in."

The trick now, he believes, isn't getting your foot in the door so much as knowing which one to open. "A lot of modders simply don't know what they want. They wanna make their game but they don't know what a level designer does versus, say, a concept artist. Collaborating through forums and



When you consider that two interviewees for this article dropped out, in the space of a week, upon being hired by major studios, the real issue of mod credibility becomes clear. What *it* wants isn't just different to what *they* want, it's opposed.

"If you live in the United States and you're functionally literate with the Unreal Engine 3 editor, then you've got a job in the game business"

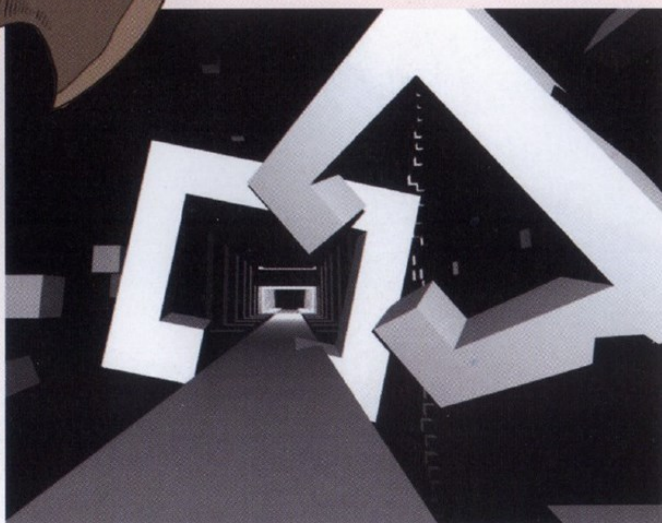
email, they start to get an idea of the business behind it, the process and the production angle. Then they're better equipped to say: 'I want to be a gameplay level designer, which means I make these cool shells that look ugly but play great'. Or: 'I want to be a visual level designer, taking that shell and putting in static meshes and lighting to make it look like something out of a Hollywood movie'. But you'd be amazed at some of the applications we get: 'I'm a game designer though I don't know what that means, but I do know I want a \$150,000 salary'."

Modding wants fame, modders want jobs – and what's added to the bottom in terms of new blood and energy, the game industry skims from the top, creating something of arguably greater repute than recognition. A cynic might say it's all part of the industry's plan, creating a kind of free-range talent farm that will always deliver but, as a society, never threaten. The truth, of course, is more complicated.

Alan Wilson is the vice president of Tripwire Interactive, which in 2005 won the Make Something Unreal contest with its *UT2003* mod, *Red Orchestra*. The grand prize, a free Unreal Engine licence, gave the team a commercial foothold, the release of *Red Orchestra: Ostfront 41-45* providing one of modding's most famous rags-to-retail stories. Ironically, the simulation-level WWII shooter then spawned a mod community of its own, easing fears that paid development might one day suck the mod scene dry. "Someone asked us about that last year," he recalls, "'Bollocks' was the impolite answer. I don't see the numbers dropping off on modding, I see them increasing all the time. Yes, you have the risk that the industry creams off the best ideas and talent, but the fame and fortune garnered by just a small number has worked wonders.

"But there has been this focus, over the last three or four years, on modding as a route into the industry. And I've seen more and more people related to the industry trying to persuade mod teams to, you know, build them a free prototype. We've had people ask us to do it and the answer is always: 'No, we're a business. We'd love to carry on doing stuff for free, but it won't keep the office open'."

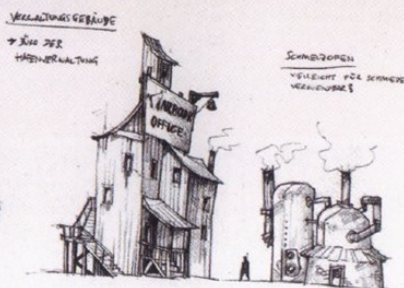
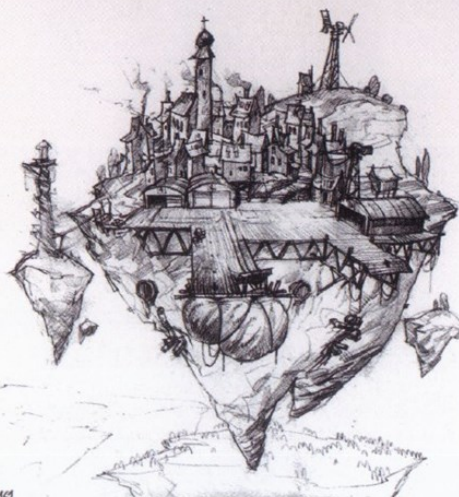
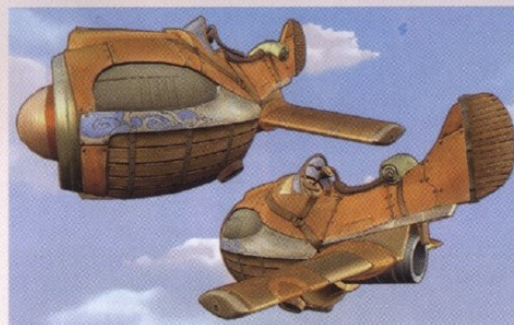
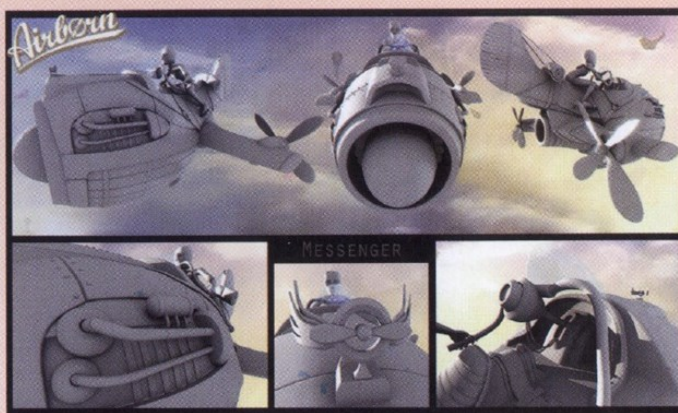
Few mod teams, he says, face the "legal minefield" of going pro, and even fewer do so with



The designer of *Jeux d'Ombres* (*Shadow Play*), a *Far Cry* mod by way of Samuel Beckett, Fritz Lang and Frank Miller, felt 'misunderstood' by his art school tutors – this was his third year project – and quit



A thirdperson action adventure "based in a world of flying islands, giant airships and dogfights", *UT3* mod *Airborn* is still in its infancy. As with so many mods, its irresistible charm has been offset by a perceived lack of momentum, its ModDB rank a lowly 1,865. What's needed, it seems, is someone versed in Unreal script to bring the project down to Earth (www.moddb.com/mods/airborn)



their teams intact. In its modding days of 2003 and 2004, companies like Gearbox and the MOVES Institute, developer of *America's Army*, picked at Tripwire's staff, relieving it of "ten or 12 guys". And as the talent drought worsens at the top, commercial studios will surely delve deeper and earlier into the mod scene. "It's the biggest challenge we face," confirms **Joe Cleary**, project lead on one of *UT3*'s most flavoursome new mods, Warm Gun. "The fact that mods take just as long to make as retail games is why it's so tough to keep people. Most members are trying to break in to the industry, so you often lose them to paying jobs. We've already had four move on to big-name studios."

The regenerative cycle of modders coming and going means that few begrudge such commercial interest, even if it hampers or even threatens ambitious projects like Warm Gun and Airborn (pictured on p81). Games and their mods inhabit the same ecosystem, after all, if not the same shelves. The fate of outfits like Trauma Studios, however, the team behind *Battlefield 1942* mod Desert Combat, has raised ethical concerns which are far from unique in the industry overall.

Famously recruited by DICE in 2004, New York-based Trauma was unceremoniously released after DICE's acquisition by EA. Accusations that the publishing giant had ransacked Trauma's IP with casual disregard for its nine-strong team were dispelled only when it emerged, at the height of the controversy, that DICE itself had called the shots. Trauma would later form Kaos Studios, and produce *Frontlines: Fuel Of War*.

"It just reflects the scale of the industry," Wilson remarks. "In our dealings over the last few years, we've seen Valve and Epic as two of the most professional organisations out there. Valve made it clear years ago, when they sued their own publisher, that they were going to stand up and be counted. So they found a bunch of kids, for example, and made *Portal*, which was never going to happen otherwise. Then you get the other end of the spectrum where, yes, someone's spotted something they know they can get for cheap and people have been screwed over in the process. In a 25-year career, I've found a sizable chunk of it to be very unprofessional. A lot of the idiocy is accidental, but a lot has malicious intent."

"We do a lot of talking on the mod 'campaign trail' to make sure teams are aware of the legals. We ran through the whole lot when we were setting up and it was a nightmare, going from a team who'd

"Modding five years ago was just something people did for fun; now it's a double-edged sword – if people take it more seriously then it becomes more serious"

never even met each other to a serious business. These days, mods tend to set out with a purpose in mind beyond just having fun. If they do that, they really should set themselves up as a non-profit business from the start. Modding five years ago was just something people did for fun; now it's a double-edged sword – if people take it more seriously then it becomes more serious."

The need for education with such a quick turnaround of new, inexperienced talent has not gone unnoticed. If the scene is such a cauldron of talent and ingenuity, believes Reismanis, then its greatest teacher must surely be itself. "Every mod project seems to run into the same challenges and make the same mistakes as its predecessors."

There's little reuse and structure in the game development process since every team is a new group of people, which is something we want to change. By creating focused development portals with industry-standard tools, made available the day a project starts, we can eliminate many of the challenges faced by modders, and eventually even professional game development."

Sensibly, no one expects publishers to be selfless in their respect for the mod community, Morris is the first to admit that Epic's outlook is, to say the least, pragmatic: "We support it where we can. For the mods that get very far along, to the point of approaching retail quality, people like [Epic VP] Mark Rein are very into that, introducing them to publishers and helping them get deals. And it's as integral a part of Epic and its games as multiplayer. We'd just as likely not do one as the other."

"But the best reason for me is that it keeps your game relevant. There's no better example of that than the character mods people are doing for the PlayStation 3. So the first character to go over was Master Chief – and *man*, every PlayStation magazine on Earth wanted a picture of that. Now it's like an arms race – I saw Solid Snake finally got himself on there. And if there's a mod that



Microsoft famously gave its blessing to the fan-made Master Chief for *UT3*; whether it would have had the game remained PS3-exclusive is unknown. One of the most popular and accessible forms of modding, character models aren't necessarily easier to make, but the results give added impetus to those inclined to try

UN-UNREAL

Even those who work with *Unreal Tournament* on a daily basis find it hard to keep up with its modders, relying instead on forum buzz and news sites. A cottage industry that handles its own marketing and feedback, the community needs no support. Here, then, are the mods that have caught Epic's eye.



BATTLEPG MUTATOR
Persistent leveling, magic items and classes for all gametypes



THE BALL - PEHUA
Negotiate puzzles using the Impact Hammer and a large steel ball



UT2D
The *UT3* experience squashed improbably into a 2D platformer



SNOWREAL
Two maps, two modes and 14 tricks' worth of *UT3* snowboarding

The confusingly titled *Unreal Tournament 3* – Community Bonus Pack 3: Volume 1 packs in eight of the finest user-created maps. Available for PC and PS3, it blurs the line between amateur and professional content, an ambiguity Epic seems happy to endorse



comes out that requires the game and gets traction, it gets you reorders and generally increases longevity. On PC, of course, the hardware improves and your game may no longer be current, but on console you're talking a six-year cycle."

The embrace of PS3 as a modding platform has been heralded by many as modding's passport into the mainstream. What works in *Unreal Tournament 3* on PC, be it a simple mutator or total conversion, will now typically work on console. Responding to the slow seek times of optical drives, Epic struck upon 'cooking' as a way of batching entire maps (weapons, characters, scripts and all) into single loads. This universal method means that UE3 mods can be packaged, delivered and installed with enormous ease, a recently released PC tool making 'Cook for PS3' a one-click affair.

"There was never really a way for guys to get into console development without spending \$10,000 on a test kit and becoming an authorised Sony developer, jumping through all these hoops that no 16-year-old ever could," says Morris. "Now, all of a sudden, they have to deal with all the stuff we're dealing with like memory,

performance and everything else. Consoles are strapped for resources next to PC, but those are the things you're gonna have to deal with if you get into the console business. Most of our designers have these octo-core PCs, these eight-CPU mothers, that can go to 2,400 resolution and still get 60 frames per second, but then they port it over to PS3 or Xbox and go: 'Ohhh – reality'. That's a valuable lesson."

As modders learn more, their stock rises in the commercial job market. So at which point, we ask Morris, does the term 'modding' become a disservice? As a culture, wouldn't the scene benefit from ditching a word that implies derivation and, dare it be said, amateurism? "I guess the hobby does have a little bit of a vernacular problem," he concedes. "We definitely call Make Something Unreal a 'modding' contest, but there's an applications section which is creating tools which interact with *UT3* to do matchmaking, help run a server or facilitate cooking on PlayStation 3. They're not even using the editor in those cases. But if people thought it dismissive of the titanic efforts they invest in these mods, I think I'd have heard about it."



STEREOSCOPIC UT3
A brief demo of *UT3* running via anaglyph stereoscopic drivers



UT3 DOMINATION
Four classic modes return alongside ten maps, four of them original



THOR LIGHTNING GUN
A custom weapon couples gravity gun attacks with a secondary blast



DM-BLOCKLAND
DM-Lego before the lawyers rang, a physics-powered blockbuster



COMMUNITY BONUS PACK 3
Eight of the best (and oddest) from *UT3*'s community map-makers

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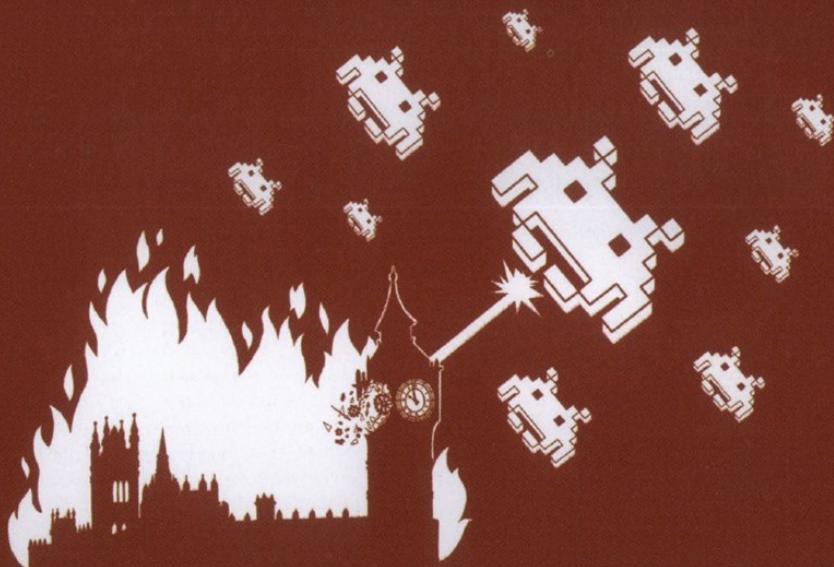
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Review

New games assessed in words and numbers

Edge's most played

Geometry Wars Evolved 2



This game of Pacifism ain't big enough for both of us. Bets have been made, friends have been lost and gloating has been in season. It's not the taking part that counts. 360, MICROSOFT

Burnout Paradise



The Cagney DLC's new modes and features have seen us beating a path back to the sun-washed city that (until the next update with bikes and night races) never sleeps. 360, PC, PS3, EA

BioShock



"I rejected those answers. I chose... Rapture!" It's easy to forget how grand and invigorating your first encounter with Andrew Ryan is – and it sucked us right back in. 360, PC, 2K GAMES

Poor Spore

Time to celebrate the tyranny of progress



Despite the modest nature of some of its online capabilities, *Spore's* option to send in-game movies directly to YouTube is bang up to date, leapfrogging other games' tendency to merely deposit player-made game media such as screenshots on their own websites

An idea first presented at the game's first showing at GDC in 2005, *Spore's* trick of having player creations pop up in others' games was once deeply interesting. It would profoundly enrich the universe and allow players to indirectly interact. But, now that *Spore* has finally been released, the idea looks distinctly pedestrian against so many other games featuring user-generated content in an online environment and a litter of Creature Creator-produced penises. You can't even see how your creations fare against those of other players.

Maxis might respond that *Spore* was never meant to be centred on direct conflict, perhaps because the competition such design would inspire might scare away a broader audience. The problem is that games, the web and the people who use them have moved on. The popularity over the last couple of years of competitive online games, like the now-defunct *Scrabulous* on Facebook, has proved that such broad audiences are quite familiar with the concept.

This is only one form of online play, of course. In this issue, we've also looked at *Viva Piñata: Trouble In Paradise*, which offers considered

options for collaboration, another feature *Spore* lacks. Garden owners can invite online visitors to their domains and choose what changes they can make there, something that the original *Viva Piñata*, which was released in late 2006, was criticised for lacking. It shows how standardised the idea of sharing play experiences has become.

And then there's creative play, something that *LittleBigPlanet* looks set to exemplify, with players able to make levels and assets and distribute them through the game. Player-made assets in the form of character designs or machines can be sent via PSN messages, won for beating challenges on player-designed levels, or claimed through editing such levels (unless the creator has chosen to lock them).

Gamers are now expecting such rich arrays of options and functionalities, an indication of how far we've come in the three years since *Spore* was first revealed. To developers, perhaps, the relentless march of progress is cruel, rotting their fresh ideas as soon as they've had them. To the rest of us, it's only proving that we've rarely enjoyed such a creatively fertile climate as the one that exists right now.



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360, PS3

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Mercenaries 2: World In Flames
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Brothers In Arms: Hell's Highway
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Fatal Frame: Mask Of The Lunar Eclipse
WII

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Crysis: Warhead
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Edge's scoring system explained:
1 = one, 2 = two, 3 = three,
4 = four, 5 = five, 6 = six, 7 = seven,
8 = eight, 9 = nine, 10 = ten



SPORE

FORMAT: PC RELEASE: OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: EA DEVELOPER: MAXIS
PREVIOUSLY IN: E151, E164, E166, E181, E187, E193

Out there



Much like the Earthlings logging in, *Spore's* much-vaunted interface with the internet still seems puzzled as to its role in the grand scheme of things. How much game tracking is going on behind the scenes is unknown, but little is being delivered to *spore.com* besides a proud boast of its creature population. The MySpore page hosts a personal gallery of user-created content, and enough data is embedded into each portrait to import the creature, building or vehicle it represents into the game. All very clever, but not quite the intergalactic stat-fest you might expect. Sporecasts, meanwhile, let you broadcast your evolution, and YouTube sharing is built in to the UI.

Those waiting for someone to distill the epic *Spore* into a just a few simple words need only look at its initial platforms: PC, Mac, Nintendo DS, mobile and iPhone. Nothing tells you quite so bluntly how Maxis' grandiose space opera, some eight years in the making, has had its orbit shifted by the irresistible magnetism of *The Sims* and its fans. It now inhabits a place somewhere between the infinite and Seattle, star child and Starbucks. Like one of its

Its design tools are some of the most flexible and entertaining ever seen, taking procedural animation to a freakish, chucklesome new level

creatures, it's been tugged, bent and squeezed, for better and for worse, into something resembling Silly Putty.

It's a surprisingly easy game to describe: five snapshots of civilisation, four looking in at its origins, the last looking out to the stars. In Cell, you pilot a single-celled organism around a rock pool using mere clicks of the mouse, eating without being eaten, becoming carnivore, herbivore or omnivore simply by your choice of meat and veg. Marching ashore with newly developed limbs in Creature, you then forage or kill for food,



The fastest evolutionary route is military, tank-rush tactics devastating opponents during Tribal and Civilization on all but the highest difficulties. Alternative tactics include diplomatic charm offensives and religious conversion

customising your species with parts taken from piles of bones. In Tribal, you climb the rungs of early civilisation, discovering the power of tools for hunting, gathering, charming and conquering. Civilization is more an RTS than Sid Meier's game, but with the familiar goal of blasting off into the cosmos, where the final stage unfolds like the great spacefarers of old – *Star Control*, *Imperium*, *Alpha Centauri* et al.

The important bit is that everyone you meet, every vehicle you encounter and every building you erect or destroy might be the

product of someone else's spore. The chance to craft and accessorise comes at every turn, the results shot into the game's online 'data cloud' before precipitating back into other people's games. In all likelihood, anything you could make out of the aforementioned putty could be moulded by its design tools, which are some of the most flexible and entertaining ever seen. And nowhere is the game's science more visible than when injecting life into those hastily plugged joints and limbs, taking procedural animation to a freakish, chucklesome new level.

The rest is like a chapel built around this user-created fresco, a place to be inspired as much as – maybe more than – entertained. Its guarantee is that you'll never know quite what's over the next hill, its servers deciding which creatures will be there to fight or flee, which tribes will offer you a serenade or a spear through the head, which ships will bombard or enrich your cities, and which faces will fill the view screen as you orbit every homeworld. This isn't just the heart of the experience but the bulk of it, the stages themselves feeling like primers for deeper, more satisfying genre games.

With a control scheme bound almost exclusively to mouse buttons and wheel, *Spore* is a smart and indiscriminate borrower, no game considered too old or primitive to inherit. *Flow*, *Powermonger*, *Diablo*, *Black & White*, *WarCraft*, *StarCraft*: all have been tossed into the primordial soup. What emerges is a childlike vision of exploration, survival, growth and war that deals in universal terms: drag and drop, nasty and nice, friend and foe. The impulsive brutality of Creature is actually quite terrifying, pack



Health and energy fuel can be replenished at any friendly planet in space, the comms channel available from both orbit and the surface. Permanent health upgrades are essential if you're to recover artefacts, scan lifeforms and smash cities





User-created species appear sporadically in epic form, a worthy scalp in Tribal and a pain during Civilization. The encounter itself is the objective, of course, player content slipstreamed beautifully into every moment



Ambient music pioneer Brian Eno sprinkles some of his magical dust over Spore's dynamic soundtrack – and he does it to marvellous effect. Modulating subliminally from moment to moment, it's one of the game's genuine breakthroughs



hunters flirting with you before chasing you down and devouring you. It's also quietly crushing to watch a city being obliterated, its people screaming while a sad-face emoticon rises from the rubble. And, yes, as you pull back from your planet, through a field of countless others and out to the silent swirl of the galaxy, it will give you pause. *Spore*

speaks in tones as simple, welcoming and affecting as those of *Close Encounters Of The Third Kind*.

At its worst, though, it's a troubling enigma. Of its first four stages, only *Civilization* offers any real replay value, leaving an immense amount riding on a botched finale, *Space*. In the quest to find

the secret at the heart of the galaxy, much of which involves building an empire of terraformed, sculpted and colonised planets, the breathtaking is saddled constantly with the clumsy and repetitive. There's plenty to find and buy that makes life among the stars easier, but the housekeeping involved – zooming back and forth to fend off pirate raids and alien invasions, scouring landscapes for vital tools, sustaining alliances, sponsoring wars, manually carrying and trading valuable spice, the list goes on – is unbearable. In what many will see as a complete misfire, it limits the mind as its universe expands.

In its defence, Will Wright says that he'd rather see the Metacritic scores and sales of *The Sims 2* than *Half-Life 2*. Well, at least he's honest. But even looking beyond the planet-sized 'if' that hangs over its sales potential, *Spore* is a stark reminder that while greatness in this market doesn't always equal success, true greatness is almost seen as anathema to it. Something as transcendent and overwhelming as the game we hoped for – the infinite, mind-boggling space odyssey suggested early on – doesn't sell expansion packs. It doesn't fit on to iPhone. It doesn't fill the vacuum left by *The Sims*. It doesn't have a place in that universe. [7]



So many of *Spore's* awards and statistics are taken that it's hard to see your historic charts in any other light. The actors might change, but the paths and outcomes are limited



Some of our early 'designs' resembled a cross between Liam Gallagher and a peanut, a pencil with a moustache, and a giraffe with its head in its backside. Despite what feels like a limited choice of parts, the possibilities for mimicry and invention seem genuinely endless



STAR WARS: THE FORCE UNLEASHED

FORMAT: 360 (VERSION TESTED), PS3 RELEASE: OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: ACTIVISION DEVELOPER: LUCASARTS
PREVIOUSLY IN: E185, E190



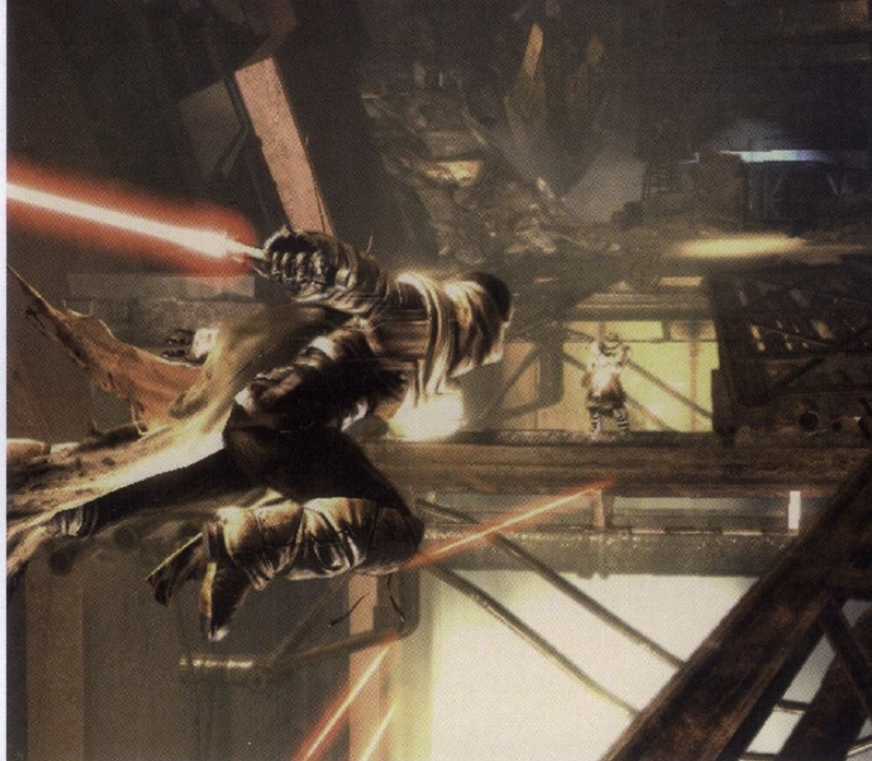
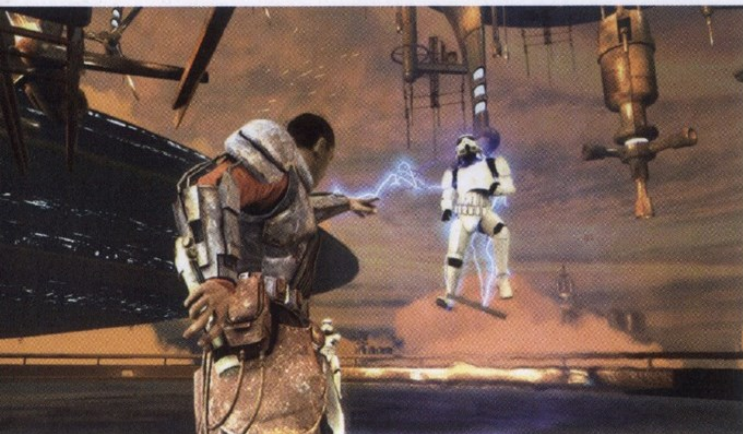
Each level sees the Apprentice's costume change, and several offerings are well designed for geeky wish-fulfilment, particularly at the game's conclusion. But where's the unlockable Boba Fett garb?

There are few things as depressing as watching Star Wars stumbling forward, each new cash-in another low for the series, every new instalment a shadow of what has gone before. It's got so bad in recent years that you almost pine for the days of Jar Jar Binks. Almost.

But here's *The Force Unleashed*, the first Star Wars game for years that isn't a movie tie-in, or a sequel to an ageing series. You can't knock the ambition behind it: LucasArts has invested in some of the greatest technology of this generation. NaturalMotion's Euphoria, Pixelux's Digital Molecular Matter and the Havok physics middleware are combined with the company's own proprietary Ronin engine –

The Force Unleashed is by no means a bad game – it's simply one that constantly makes you think of what a brilliant experience it could have been

all in the service of spectacular twisting of metal, salad-tossing of stormtroopers, and the odd environmental puzzle. LucasArts and Industrial Light And Magic are handling the cinematic side, George Lucas himself has added his touch to the script, and when you press start for the first time the John Williams score booms out of your speakers. Surely, you think, this time they've got it right.



Wrong. But *The Force Unleashed* is by no means a bad game – it's simply one that constantly makes you think of what a brilliant experience it could have been. The opening – in which you march Darth Vader through ranks of wookies, using Force-powered pushing and pulling to collapse the

swagger you'd expect from a genocidal Force-pusher. Then it all happens again with the next four or five enemies, then again and again. If you take a player to the extremes of in-game power, giving them the equivalent of a god mode against standard enemies, how can that be turned into something more engaging than a temporary plaything? Even in this first section, it's clear what *The Force Unleashed*'s biggest problem will be: coming up with a challenge that isn't either going through the motions or simply unfair.

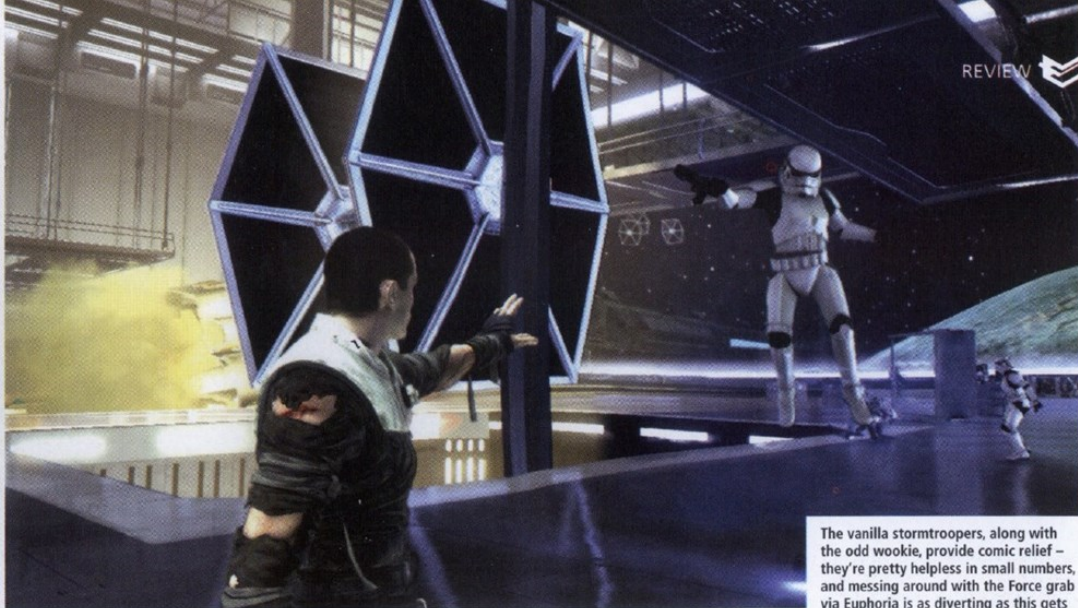
It vacillates before it cheats. *The Force Unleashed* chooses to somewhat ignore the problem of its concept – that of being an, ahem, "ass-kicking" Jedi at the height of his powers – by delivering a clutch of non-canonical elements that serve to negate your powers. They're videogaming's equivalent of the MacGuffin: Force-resistant shields, enemies that are too heavy to lift by virtue of wearing a metal suit (despite the fact you'll

wooden architecture of Kashyyk upon its residents, before the section ends with grandly staged cinematic flair – sets the scene in more ways than one. Because, weirdly, it's not very much fun.

Everything crumbles and bends like it should, wookies are sent flying with a wave of your hand and fall after a single Lightsaber swing, while old deathmask has all the



A thousand curses be upon thee, *God Of War*. Every big enemy and every boss in *The Force Unleashed* is finished off with QTEs to showcase some spectacular moves you can't do in the game proper



The vanilla stormtroopers, along with the odd wookiee, provide comic relief – they're pretty helpless in small numbers, and messing around with the Force grab via Euphoria is as diverting as this gets



happily lift entire sections of buildings) and – very often in the later stages – the simple old unblockable knock-back attack. Rather than upping the ante in terms of numbers or strategy as your powers increase (imagine the prospect of tossing around an entire company of stormtroopers), the game simply makes enemies more resistant to them.

Knocking stormtroopers around and bending things are fun activities in themselves, but once the stage curtains and sheer linearity of the game's non-combat Force interactions are glimpsed, they never wholly disappear. Certain enemies become grinds: another AT-AT walker means another round of holding down the electricity button, running away to recharge, then rinsing and repeating before the QTE that delivers the finishing blow. And, once acquired, electricity becomes your default attack: there's no need to toss Lightsabers at things, or push or pull them, when you can simply hold down a button and win.

Irritatingly, the game's bosses display that strange ability of being invulnerable to your weapon when they choose to be: slap a Jedi in the face with your Lightsaber at the 'wrong' moment and they won't even react. A climactic moment against a Star Destroyer,

meanwhile, is implemented with bewildering logic: the onscreen prompts actually make the task harder, and it turns into an attritional slog rather than a triumphant realisation of power. And what is the point of having a visually spectacular in-game fight that shows incremental progress, but then switching to a CG cutscene for the conclusion? LucasArts clearly sees a marked division between narrative and interaction,

but it's a disconnect that most players will not be happy to accept.

That narrative is one of *The Force Unleashed's* few triumphs, however. It would have made a better film than any of the prequels, and the Apprentice's story is surprising in its outcome and scope. Yes, there's a helping of mushy nonsense, and a thigh-slapping comedy droid, but in general this is work of a high standard. Even the main character, who could be fairly described as 'generic white male', proves to be a memorable creation by the game's conclusion, which few could have foreseen.

Throughout the entirety of *The Force Unleashed*, though, you cannot escape the feeling that it should all add up to more. It falls over in several areas, but perhaps most disappointing is its fear of innovation. Despite its market-leading technology, the game clings tightly to clichés of the genre that were established on platforms of old. Rather than embrace the hero and explore his abilities, LucasArts has chosen to bind and trammel him in thirdperson combat conventions. This isn't the Force unleashed, then, but the Force on an uncomfortably tight leash. [5]

Use the Force. No, really, do



As Master Yoda tells us, you can improve your connection to the Force by killing lots of things and finding secret glowing orbs. This lets you upgrade the Apprentice's stats, unlock new moves and boost existing ones – but any sensible player will do the sensible thing and simply upgrade their Force recovery and the size of the Force bar itself before touching anything else. There is also a selection of Lightsaber combos on offer, though you'll only ever need one – a massive, lightning-infused overhead strike. More fun, though of less practical value, is the option to simply change the colour of your beam. Always, always, go for purple.



There's nothing like a fistful of lightning. The Force has a bit more kick than a plasmid, but sadly its interactions with the world are more constrained. At least you can use it while jumping





MERCENARIES 2: WORLD IN FLAMES

FORMAT: 360, PC, PS2, PS3 (VERSION TESTED)
RELEASE: OUT NOW PUBLISHER: EA DEVELOPER: PANDEMIC

Tango and cash



New to *World In Flames* is a drop-in/drop-out co-op mode that's more or less as good as it sounds. Two players can tackle all of its objectives and story missions together, reviving each other by simply closing in and tapping a button. Only the host progresses, however, the guest getting to keep whatever money they make. There don't seem to be any co-op specific bugs, the incidental comedy instead coming from vastly amplified human error. Shelling the enemy (and your friend) to oblivion never gets old, nor do tandem flights through urban canyons in helicopter gunships. In short, the possibilities for guiltless Hollywood wish-fulfilment are doubled.

Notable targets include an island fortress with ramparts and a lagoon, an oil rig built for last-second helicopter escapes, and a shanty town that'll fly apart with just an evil thought. Few pose a significant challenge



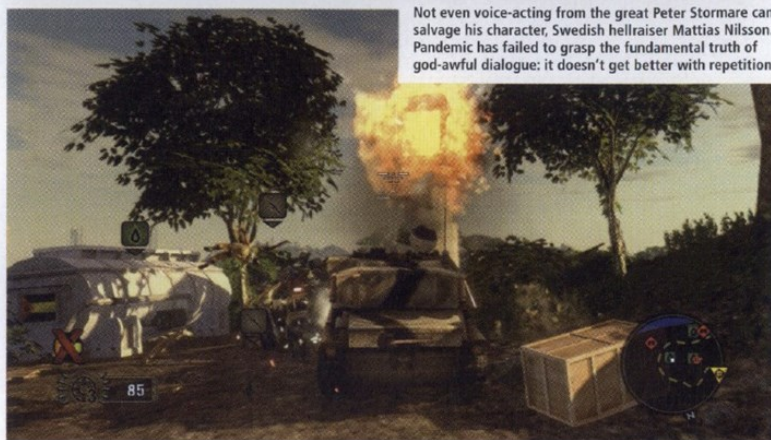
It's been two years since supporters of President Hugo Chavez accused Pandemic, maker of the US army-sponsored *Full Spectrum Warrior*, of priming its audience for a US-led invasion of Venezuela. The riposte was that *Mercenaries 2*, a game in which a 'tyrant' tightens his grip on Venezuela's oil supply and is targeted for assassination, was simply entertainment. That it 'rips from the headlines' the backbone of a good story was, said Pandemic, its prerogative. The argument rages on.

As luck would have it, though, the finished game is so devoid of story, character and stance, its action and AI so surreal, that taking offence takes way more effort than it deserves. Long before you question its agenda, you'll be asking why its helicopters insist on ramming each other in the sky, why your support squad was jettisoned from its transport 100 feet above the ground, or why that marksman chose to jump you from 15 storeys up.

The good news for fans of 2005's *Playground Of Destruction* is that *Mercenaries* remains an absolute blast. Its belief that money should be no object in the pursuit of oil means that you're seldom, if ever, out of pocket, leaving you free to



Not even voice-acting from the great Peter Stormare can salvage his character, Swedish hellraiser Mattias Nilsson. Pandemic has failed to grasp the fundamental truth of god-awful dialogue: it doesn't get better with repetition



bring its world to ruin at a relentless pace. By the time you've piled ten laser-guided bombs into various targets, robbing and salvaging the required fuel, you'll have cashed enough pay cheques to buy 50 more. If you die, which is a rarity in all but the closing stages, the route back to your objective is seldom long and always lined with replacement weapons.

Loading screens aside, the action here is kept on a roll. The immense map is so thick with objectives, factions and artillery that you can essentially crowd surf your way from vehicle to vehicle (ground, air and now sea) before dialling up your stockpile and disintegrating your target. Most of the sequel's additions represent a shortcut or a distraction, your new PMC allies able to chopper you to and fro, while a new High Value Target system of chance kidnappings replaces the last game's Deck Of 52. The destruction throughout, in variety as much as scale, is tremendous.

The bad news is that, with so much to do over such a wide area, Pandemic has overreached itself. That the story and dialogue revolve around you being shot in the rear end says a lot, much of the game padded out with nominally different tasks, mission merchants and battles. The aforementioned AI bugs aren't quite rare enough to slip from memory, and while



Quantity over quality is the rule with the game's AI, the idea being that a dozen suicidal mentalists can do the job of one capable soldier. They can't. Shooting the gunner of a jeep, for example, will prompt the driver to stop, get out, stand in the gunner's place and get shot

new QTE segments, triggered as you commandeer the better vehicles, are short, they're either pointlessly easy or impossible depending on who's involved.

The democratically elected Chavez probably has a right to be upset by such a crass and egregious portrayal of him (let's be honest) and his country. But his deeper suspicions are unnecessary: riotous as it is, *Mercenaries 2* has too much instability of its own to be promoting it anywhere else. [6]



The by-the-numbers tank missions diverge from the game's main area of competence, but are so direct in their action as to feel cathartic after being stuck behind sandbags



REVIEW

BROTHERS IN ARMS: HELL'S HIGHWAY

FORMAT: 360, PC, PS3 RELEASE: SEPTEMBER 26
PUBLISHER: UBISOFT DEVELOPER: GEARBOX
PREVIOUSLY IN: E164, E185, E192

If the devil's in the details, then Gearbox's latest instalment in its World War II squad shooter series is locked in something of a Faustian struggle, dealing out moments of diabolic slipshodder and precisely realised minutiae in equal measure. It is, for example, a nice touch that your squad speak in hushed tones when approaching a German position undetected. That they are incapable of counting, on the other hand, is something of a frustration. "Cease fire! Cease fire! They're dead," a squadmate will trumpet repeatedly, quite in contradiction of the evidence still issuing loudly from numerous German guns. But if such frequent lapses are usually the hallmark of a game that has only just stumbled, shell-shocked out of beta, then *Hell's Highway* just about manages to be more than the sum of its dubious trivia; Gearbox has made a game that is stable and complete, if hugely unrefined in places, with an under-exploited but sound core of tactical squad combat.

Like *BIA* games before it, *Hell's Highway* gives the player control of multiple teams of men from a firstperson perspective. A single click toggles the selection between teams which can then be directed to move to a particular point, where they take cover automatically, or target particular enemies. However, opponents are reticent to present parts of their bodies to be shot off, and the inaccuracy of your weapons means that *Hell's Highway* demands a more methodical approach than most shooters, forcing you to make use of cover and lay down suppressing fire in order to flank entrenched foes.

When given the opportunity, the necessity to outmanoeuvre enemies facilitates the game's most thrilling battles, as you race the Germans to take up the most advantageous positions on a battlefield. However, *Hell's Highway* doesn't quite commit itself enough to this mechanic, and all too often the opportunity to exploit the environment tactically is limited, particularly



Environments, while supposedly accurately based on historical scenarios, are often tightly controlled, with invisible walls funnelling you along a strict path, and it's difficult not to feel that the game would be vastly improved if it allowed for a more open approach. Sometimes, historical accuracy just isn't enough

in the squad-less missions, relegating combat to a tiring exchange of long-distance shots. These solo outings are largely ill-advised: having made compromises in gunplay so as to encourage players to use the squad, the game is not really equipped to handle the kind of frenetic action seen in brasher military shooters like *Call Of Duty*.

Lengthy cutscenes punctuate the action, and while these are often well shot, neither the writing nor the acting is really up to the task of emulating *Band Of Brothers*, and try as it might, the game never convinces you to care much about Sgt Matt Baker or the men under his command. Perhaps part of the problem is that the dour, reverent tone of the cutscenes is gleefully contradicted elsewhere in the game, particularly in the depiction of German soldiers, with their nasal screeching and tendency to explode in slow motion. Gearbox appears unsure whether war is hell or a hell of a laugh.

Nonetheless, *Hell's Highway* manages to produce some tightly orchestrated problems and, occasionally, offers you neat tactical solutions whose predetermination is well disguised. Its limp attempt at run-and-gun diversions, the failure of its stolid narrative and the litany of minor flaws don't quite manage to bring down its central tactical gameplay, but nor is it ambitious enough to truly redeem the whole venture.

[6]

Rough injustice



One particularly palpable example of the game's erratic level of quality is in its visual design. Attention is lavished on certain tiny details, and the game makes bold choices with its palette to escape the slurry of browns and greys in which World War II games are usually mired. A night mission in a bombed-out city is brought to life with lurid blues and pinks; a deserted hospital has the sickly greens of *Hammer Horror*. But it's all undone by a basic technical blight. To say it has texture pop-in implies an urgency entirely absent from *Hell's Highway*, often leaving cutscenes to drag on for minutes before the bleary polygonal shapes are given skin and clothing. Even the tactical map is barely decipherable for an inexcusable amount of time before the correct-resolution image appears.



The AI is somewhat erratic. Your men will sometimes pleasantly surprise you by taking a cautious route to their objective – at other times they will wander straight into crossfire. The enemy AI responds to threats credibly, but will never take the initiative and force the player back

FATAL FRAME: MASK OF THE LUNAR ECLIPSE

FORMAT: WII RELEASE: NOW (JAPAN), TBC (UK)
PUBLISHER: NINTENDO DEVELOPER: TECMO/GHM
PREVIOUSLY IN: E191

Boo!

While praise should undoubtedly be heaped on the creation of dread, the shocks themselves are certainly not lacking. A particular favourite is tied to the action command. Blue lights indicate objects to tinker with, and while the majority contain items, a few are simply there to have a ghost pop out and grab your wrist. A neat 'should I, shouldn't I?' dilemma soon arises. Tecmo isn't afraid to have ghosts leap up during cutscenes either, deftly misdirecting the viewer for optimal shrieking.

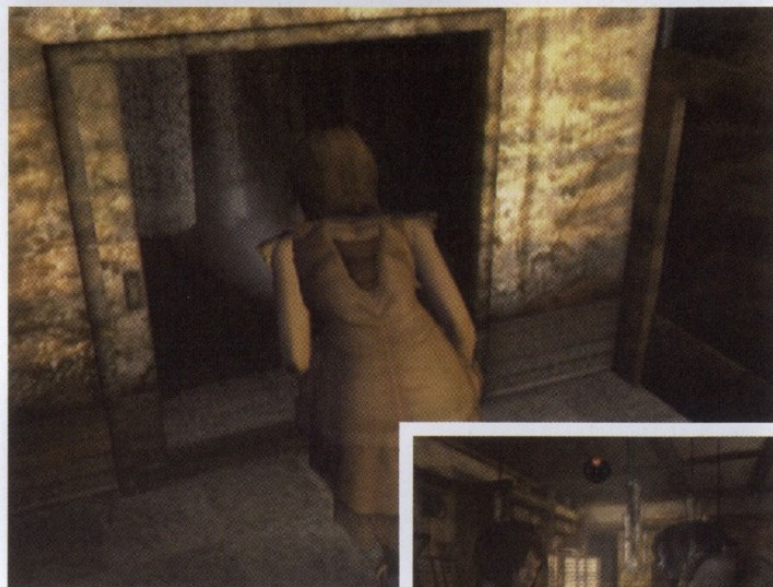
Fatal Frame has always been a game of two conflicting halves: the cold-sweat creep through the murk juxtaposed against brisk head-to-heads with J-horror phantoms. When these anti-Caspers materialise, out comes the Camera Obscura, entombing the spooks on celluloid. But while the teeth clench as ghost proximity is risked for stronger snaps, the sudden fizzing to life of an exhaustive points breakdown – a mess of onscreen commentary – is guaranteed to instantly deflate the situation.

Chained combos, attack strength and health bars are the arcade paraphernalia of Tecmo's sillier, inflated-bosom ways, entirely at odds with the masterful dread-weaving of exploration. The same has been said of previous *Frames*, but here the flaw is magnified by the sheer quality of the softly-softly moments.

We've trodden these creaky paths before, but with a *Resident Evil 4*-styled shift from fixed camera to over-the-shoulder character trailing, the ornate mansions and hospital corridors are near unrecognisable. Designing levels to be viewed at the player's discretion encourages subtle spooking, Tecmo relying on incidental curtain flutters and looming water stains where nasties squirmed away via awkward camera placement once



What few scares the camera ekes out are lost with the arrival of the ghost torch. Hammering the A button to repeat fire turns it into little more than a dumb ghost shotgun



The levels themselves are ridiculously labyrinthine. Endless locked doors are one thing, crawling through the wall space to reach a child's bedroom quite another

sufficed. An overabundance of porcelain masks and mannequins helps too.

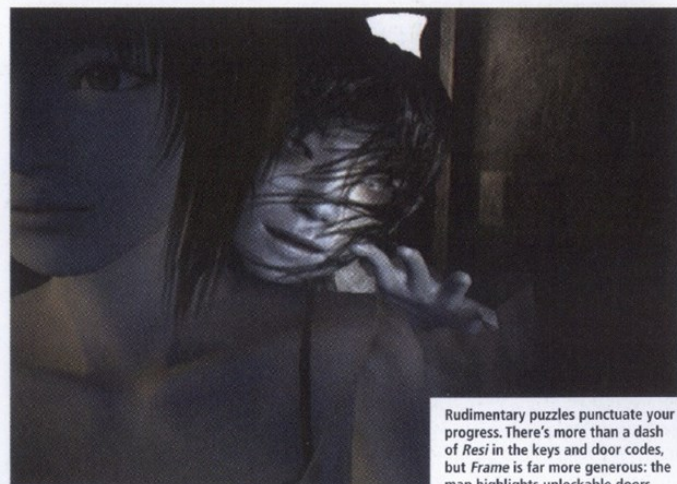
With Tecmo proving more efficient ghost house architects than ever – nicely eschewing *Resi*'s musty beiges for striking moonlight – eyes turn to co-producer Suda 51 for the tweaks that shape your time in the house. While his exact input is unknown, there are plenty of echoes of *No More Heroes* to fill in the gaps. Ghostly phone calls delivered through the crackly Remote speaker; the guillotine shutter of the Camera Obscura itself; a torch aimed, not by pointing, but tilting – all recycled from that earlier game.

The last of these, the tilting torch, has been written off by some as a misstep: surely pointer control would have been ideal? The aim, so to speak, is not precision but hindrance. What is there to fear in a darkness easily cleft with FPS controls? The sticky drag of the torch – and the identically

controlled vertical axis of the camera – is a masterstroke of timing, just enough to have a ghost creep up undetected, but not so stodgy as to seem deliberately stubborn. If any proof is needed that awkward is often better, we look to the later introduction of a ghost-slaying torch that swiftly dispatches spooks on the spot, and any hint of suspense along with them.

Suda's impish handiwork is felt too in a tremendous pressure-sensitive action command. Holding the A button sees your moves enacted; release it and your hand retracts. Normally automatically performed, we've forgotten the vulnerability of venturing a hand into places unknown. Pulling back the curtain, feeling under the bed, tapping a stranger on the shoulder; zombies, ghosts and *Silent Hill*'s meatsacks are revealed as the cheap scare tactics they really are.

Of course, that these actions often reward you with a new trinket to empower your ghost-melting Kodak reminds you of *Fatal Frame*'s 'Say cheese!' endgame. However, for the sake of unprecedented horror interaction, it's worth smiling for the camera.

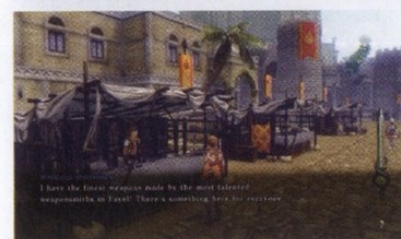
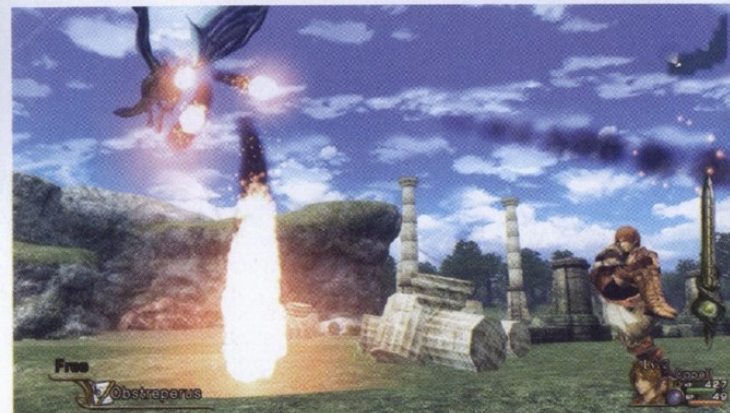


Rudimentary puzzles punctuate your progress. There's more than a dash of *Resi* in the keys and door codes, but *Frame* is far more generous: the map highlights unlockable doors





The option to 'connect' with other teams allows room for ingenuity. Link up with a beastmaster on your team and you'll be able to talk to the animals for extra puzzles



The game is graphically sub-par, far below the visual robustness of system rival *Lost Odyssey*, for example. It's also possible to become stuck in the scenery

INFINITE UNDISCOVERY

FORMAT: 360 RELEASE: OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: SQUARE ENIX DEVELOPER: TRI-ACE
PREVIOUSLY IN: E191

This game is a work of fiction. Any similarities to actual people, locations, organisations and events are purely coincidental. The disclaimer that appears each time you boot up Tri-Ace's latest RPG is probably unnecessary. This is, after all, a game in which you assume the role of a flautist on a mission to, quite literally, unchain the moon. The plot pivots on a Kagemusha-esque case of mistaken identity – your character, the pacifist Capell, is the exact lookalike of a notorious rebel leader – but other than this worn plot motif, it's self-evident fantasy.

Likewise, there should be few concerns over copycat mechanics because, while this action-RPG inhabits one of the narrowest and most conservative of niches, it's bursting at the seams with fresh ideas and brave new interactive directions. Boasting the involvement of designer Yoshiharu Gotanda,

the man behind the *Tales*, *Star Ocean* and *Valkyrie Profile* series, ahead of release *Infinite Undiscovery* has become something of a poster child for genre reinvention.

However, it's precisely this weight of expectation under which the game caves, so eager to try new things that, for the first few hours at least, ideas are thrown at you at a manic, unsatisfying rate. A ropery chase scene through a dungeon is followed by an incongruous stealth section through a forest, before leading on to a tedious escort mission and, finally, a convoluted and poorly designed dungeon puzzle. This large range of player situations, designed to give the game's opening pace and breadth, falls flat for lacking excellence or gracefulness.

Nevertheless, after a faltering start the game settles into a steady rhythm, in part due to a strong fight system, which eschews random out-of-context battles for free-

flowing encounters in the field. In contrast to *Final Fantasy XIII*'s similar approach, you have direct control over your character's sword, while your three teammates look after themselves, adhering to general behaviours you specify such as 'save MP', 'push forward' and so on.

A touch of the Y button will issue a heal call, and one of your teammates will respond with either an item or a spell directed at whoever the AI deems to be in most need. This system is effective, and needs to be: entering a menu screen does not pause the onscreen action meaning that, should you ever need to root around for a potion during a fight, your character is wholly vulnerable while you do so.

But despite a solid battle core, the game falls short of expectations. Where Tri-Ace succeeded in its *Valkyrie Profile* titles was in creating tight artificial boundaries for the experiences and then exploring the space they created in deep and interesting ways. By contrast, *Infinite Undiscovery* broadens its borders both technically, with fully 3D environments to explore, and conceptually, with multiple mechanical threads. In doing so, the game's ambition reaches further than perhaps its budget could reach, thus failing to either deliver or explore its ideas as they were no doubt envisioned.

[6]



The game is subtitled, but some cutscenes (although by no means all) see it splutter into voice, with a wooden English dub and no attempt at lip-synching. Whether this is deliberate, or the result of budget constraints, we'll never know

Team building



There are moves towards a *Suikoden*/*Chrono Cross*-style army building. But with a character roster of just 18 (lots for a traditional RPG but few for an army), and no central hub in which to collect and house them, this emphasis falls a little flat. Inevitably, you will soon settle upon your favourite combination of three other permanent team members, after which there are few reasons to mix and match. The option to send redundant characters off on other quests and the inability to optimise equipment for a character at the touch of a button further cements your choice.

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CRYSIS WARHEAD

FORMAT: PC RELEASE: SEPTEMBER 26
PUBLISHER: EA DEVELOPER: CRYTEK
PREVIOUSLY IN: E193

Whenever a natural environment achieves equilibrium, chances are there'll be thunder and lightning to mark the event. As if to prove that the same is true of the virtual world, *Crysis Warhead* is a studiously rebalanced show of its predecessor's cataclysmic power. More accessible to both mid-spec hardware and middling skill, it's described by Crytek as little more than a game of 'destruction and the tools it requires'. But what destruction, what tools, and what a stunningly rejuvenated world to put them in.

Warhead fills in the missing hours of Sergeant Michael 'Psycho' Sykes, the least vapid and most outrageously stereotypical of the first game's heroes, deployed elsewhere for much of its plot. "I'm English, you Muppet!" we're reminded twice, without provocation, as both alien invaders and the North Korean army are given a five-hour bout of top-class GBH (Great British Hassle). So when the developer calls this a better-characterised, more narrative-led experience than the first game, know that you could grit an entire frozen island with the salt that requires.

Crytek has, however, turned its game of 'action bubbles' and exploratory play into one of more traditional episodes and versatile set-pieces, each bookended by dramatic cutscenes. Where *Crysis* felt like a game hidden within its own world, only visible through an elusive matrix of muscle-suit abilities and tactics, here the goal is clear:



get from A to B intact, however you can, against seemingly insurmountable odds. What began as a neat upshot of making CryEngine 2 more efficient – in short, the old boast of having more guys on screen at once – is arguably the making of its second game.

Trouble doesn't just find you in *Warhead*, it ambushes and bombards you, swerving into view in an armoured truck before trying to run you over, filling the sky before swooping down and lashing you with freeze rays and swirling tentacles. Despite the lower hardware requirements and greater momentum, what the game achieves more than anything is a critical mass of opponents and AI finally worthy of the muscle-suit. Its first encounter, a showdown with dozens of soldiers in a beach resort full of popping glass and spiralling debris, demands more power-juggling than *Crysis* did over a dozen hours.

There's a moment near the end when Sykes, a man inclined to shoot first, kick



Where enemies in *Crysis* were prone to getting 'stuck' under fire, *Warhead's* have been reprogrammed to react first and think later. The result is obvious, the action reaching a whole new level of spontaneity



the corpse and leave the questions for the newspapers, sits head in hands in a scene thick with murder, neither word spoken nor judgement made. It's a terrific moment in a game crammed with Schwarzeneggerian action, and something *Warhead* would have done well to explore further. In all fairness, though, there's little room in this 'expandalone' for navel-gazing. In the big dumb act of blowing its extraordinary world to kingdom come, *Crysis* finds itself smarter than ever. While it's hard to recall a more red-blooded battle since *Lost Planet*, it's harder still to recall a more decisive remedy to a game's initial flaws.

[8]

Suited and booted



Crytek's mantra of accessibility is pervasive, *Warhead's* multiplayer benefiting from a finely redesigned Power Struggle and new team deathmatch mode, all boasting a faster turnaround of games and tighter map design. Littered with weapons from the singleplayer game, they reduce the gap from spawn to combat readiness to mere seconds. Additionally, Crytek has taken a less feverish approach to muscle-suit abilities, leaving it to the player to discover and master them while focusing its own attention on basic deathmatch dynamics. The result is the settling of the suit into the player's arsenal, further tweaks making it a weapon as easy to exploit as it is to overcome.



In a game full of chokepoints, few showboating opportunities are wasted. Wherever there's a corner you're sure to turn, there's a stunning vista that unloads all ten barrels of DirectX at the screen. The alien ice sphere is much better handled, the game's island safari circling and penetrating it constantly





When you've released plenty of Graydians and covered a certain amount of a zone with paint, the little fellows begin dancing around the streets and cheer as you go by



DE BLOB

FORMAT: WII RELEASE: SEPTEMBER 26 PUBLISHER: THQ
DEVELOPER: BLUE TONGUE PREVIOUSLY IN: E186

Rita, Sue and Blob too



De Blob comes with several multiplayer modes that are far more than afterthoughts. Blob on the Run is a particularly inspired stroke: only one Blob can paint things at a time, while the other players try to chase him down. Thanks to the symmetrical maps, some great runs can be had, but co-ordinated pincer attacks are common. The fun begins, of course, when three players reach a single Blob at the same time and begin squabbling among themselves. There's also a straightforward race mode to cover as much of the map as possible, but that quickly turns into angry backstabbing as Blobs begin painting over each others' tracks.

In defiance of Gil Scott-Heron, *De Blob's* revolution is most definitely televised. The enemy leader rants in front of his defaced statue, the foot soldiers show off the new toys they'll use to bring you down, and it's all tied together by a presenter with a sharp suit and a fine syrup. It's upheaval with an eye on the production values – something that stands for the game writ large.

De Blob is founded on a central mechanic of painting things. Whether you're splashing walls, transforming a monument or barrelling through the Graydian populace, it's all about change. And it works brilliantly.

Each level is a series of locations that presents a monochrome vista. Drab, depressing and dull. As you begin to squelch around the buildings, knocking over lampposts and revitalising trees, a few twangs of upbeat music begin to invade the maudlin threnody that hangs over the level. A bit more colour, and more music arrives. Different colours, different instruments begin. By the time you've painted a few things, a real rhythm is going, and *De Blob*



When you enter a section there's usually some kind of landmark to observe – which becomes the crowning glory of your new paint job as its physical structure, alongside its colour, changes to fit the new surroundings



Painting in one colour might seem attractive to the OCD-leaning among us, but the game rewards you for being as chaotic as possible with the available hues: splashing everything in a block a different colour nets a bonus that can get hefty

begins to acquire a life all of its own. As you bounce, colour, dive and splat things the entire landscape is changing and the soundtrack is getting excited with you.

Seeing the locations come back to life, the oppressed Graydians gradually escaping their prisons and being re-coloured through your influence while turning the monolithic landmarks of the Inkt corporation into public displays of revolution, is a unique experience. It's helped immensely by the charming character design (which, in some cases, has most definitely been 'inspired' by Blue Tongue's past work on the *Spongebob Squarepants* games) and the easy humour of the ongoing story, even though the talking heads of your cohorts sometimes pop up with advice just a little too freely – working out each enemy's weakness would have been a welcome challenge as opposed to having them revealed just before your first encounter.

There's nothing in *De Blob* that spoils the game as a whole, but there are a few irritants. Prime among these is Blob's jump, which is mapped to a Remote flick: it's workable, but feels like exactly the kind of

thing that would be more appropriate on a button – particularly since some jumps demand the kind of precision that can be difficult to effect via gestures. The wall jumps also feel a little random: sometimes you'll go shooting off like a rocket, while on other occasions Blob'll simply slide to the ground, and there's no obvious way of determining why.

But there is something about Blob himself that suits the game's occasionally slapdash style. And the failings become less pronounced when you consider the generosity of content on offer: completing each level unlocks separate challenge levels, extra soundtracks, multiplayer maps and modes, plus other trinkets – as well as making the level itself available in Free Play, with the licence to just go and do as you will.

And that is a particularly appealing aspect of *De Blob*. It's by no means freeform, but it's a game for meandering in, for absorbing and messing around with. Trying to play it like a straight platformer misses the point. In a world of family-friendly games whose desire to appeal to all makes them feel wishy-washy, it's a welcome splash of colour. [8]



When the 'Heat' bar is full, Kiryu can either go medieval with whatever weapon he's holding or, if unarmed, execute some brutal context-sensitive attacks. It's the only way to put the tougher enemies down permanently



YAKUZA 2

FORMAT: PS2 RELEASE: SEPTEMBER 28
PUBLISHER: SEGA DEVELOPER: AMUSEMENT VISION

If *Shenmue*'s dead, it's dead in the same way that Elvis is 'dead'. It's easy to look at the *Yakuza* series and draw the parallels with Sega's last great indulgence, but there's something very different about them. It's as if someone got hold of Ryo Hazuki by the collar and shook him up a bit before it all went wrong, then made him get a proper job and stop looking for sailors.

In short, *Yakuza* is like *Shenmue*'s alpha younger brother. It's got more purpose, more focus, and is much grittier. It's hardly what you'd call authentic, however: *Yakuza 2* is all about a bit of the old ultraviolence, and romanticising the gangster lifestyle. The first game's protagonist, Kiryu Kazuma, returns to crack heads, glower moodily and jog around shops in no particular order, triggering hours of cutscenes and legions of minigames.

It flits mercurially between these activities: at any point you're liable to be accosted by a group of thugs, while climatic moments are

ridiculously huge fights through buildings stuffed with henchmen before a boss who's trained in 20 martial arts, including the feared Massive Health Bar technique. Fighting's a mixture of speed, clumsiness, solid connections and vicious finishers, and is as chaotic and satisfying as all of that suggests. Advanced techniques are quickly unlocked, and by the sixth chapter you're a demented ninja in a sharp suit who only the aforementioned boss juggernauts can put up much of a struggle against. Unfortunately, the strange lock-on system of the original, which fixes on direction rather than specific enemies, returns. It can be worked around, of course, but feels a little wobbly in larger groups where enemies easily blindside Kiryu and he sometimes ends up punching thin air.

Between the bigger fights you end up in one of several towns, each crammed with restaurants, clothes shops, pharmacies, mah-jong parlours, hostess clubs, bars and arcades. These sections are exhaustively detailed timesinks, stuffed with ultimately useless but utterly hypnotic collectables, distractions and arcade machines. You'll lose hours: the first time you find a bar it's impossible not to get smashed – each drink comes with addictive tidbits of information about the manufacturer and taste. Buying trinkets for the hostesses, finding out the history of foods, pouring money into the UFO catchers and picking up experience points for half the things you 'waste' time on... It's easy to forget about all of the organised crime Kiryu needs to get through.

He always get pulled back in, though, because the narrative is an expertly paced conspiracy story that twists in some surprising ways – with a sprinkling of



The convenience stores will stock you up on game-essential items, but a few of the game's locker keys are found in their aisles. There's a rank of lockers in each town, and around 50 keys to be found for each one – it's just another of *Yakuza 2*'s little obsessions

charming lunatics of the sort at which Sega always used to excel. It's all done through those lengthy cutscenes, however, which can grate a little when they pass beyond the ten-minute mark. On the plus side, the translation is simply subtitled this time around and is of a generally high standard. It lapses, but rarely, and maintains the series' tradition of colourful language.

Yakuza 2 is another highlight of PS2's astonishing Indian summer – at least from the perspective of western gamers (it's been available in Japan since December 2006). Its flaws are downplayed in the context of its range, its humour, its oddities, and its alternately psychopathic and pandering NPCs. It's as unusual as it is conventional. Most of all, it's one of those Sega games that the company no longer seems so keen to make. It really is a Sega game, then, in the most complimentary sense of the term. [8]

No sex, please, we're Yakuza



One of the odder aspects of *Yakuza* is that despite its adult subject matter and penchant for bloody violence, it's a little unsure about sex. Or, to be more accurate, it's full of the sex industry but no actual sex, preferring delicate deflections or, in extreme cases, little more than innuendo. You can seduce hostesses for some red-hot screen-fading action, or go to massage parlours for some soft-focus steaminess and a minigame, or even watch Kiryu watching porn. It's all strangely subdued, and in huge contrast to the potty-mouthed attitude of the rest of the game.



Club Segas are dotted around in the cities, as well as bowling alleys and golf ranges – though several of the more interesting locations aren't obvious and need to be pointed out by other characters. This is where the game's seemingly endless side-missions come in



VIVA PIÑATA: TROUBLE IN PARADISE

FORMAT: 360 RELEASE: OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: MICROSOFT DEVELOPER: RARE

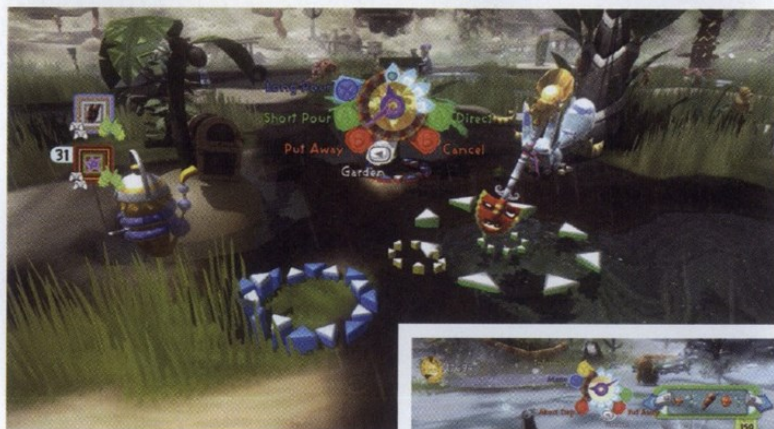
Card tricks



If you're itching for a garden filled with monocled Penguins, Piñata Vision allows you to import animals and items directly into your game by scanning special cards with the oft-neglected Live Vision camera. And it's far from the manipulative pocket-money-gouging strategy you might expect: rather than stocking cards at toddler eye-level in tobacconists around the world, Rare encourages you to make your own, photographing your target using the new screengrab mode and then printing them via the website. Every in-game object is tagged, allowing you to capture a piñata's name, stats, and any accessories it may be wearing. Proudly confirming Clarke's Third Law, the camera can even read cards that are displayed on iPod (or Zune) screens.

Nurture your garden, raise animals, give them names, and then feed them to each other: despite the sunshine and green grass, *Viva Piñata* has always been quietly shocking. Sure, this is a game that lets you make friends with a Fudgehog – but if that relationship doesn't work out, you can also batter him over the head with a shovel and watch as his insides are picked apart by his furry playmates. Rare's primary colours may suggest a game that's both simple-minded and somewhat twee, but the title's morbid fascination with the pragmatic violence that lies at the heart of nature means the original found time to explore some surprisingly meaty themes along the way, with the death of a simple Quackberry carrying far more weight than the disappearing corpses of a hundred *COD* infantrymen. Happily, while the sequel has made the game easier to get stuck into, deep down, *Trouble In Paradise* sees the series remaining as brilliantly perverse as ever, and an hour's play will no doubt find you with blood on your shovel once more as you serve up innocent Mousemallows as lures to Syrupents, and slaughter your excess Whirlms with abandon.

And even if the game may traumatise any children who play it, at least this time they'll be able to get further into the candy-



Although there's no splitscreen in local co-op, the camera copes surprisingly well with framing all the action. You may have trouble spotting Whirlms in jeopardy when the view is fully extended, however. Over 30 new additions to the food chain raise the headcount to over 100. It's still a long way off *Pokémon*, but at least these can be made to eat each other



coloured bloodbath without being overwhelmed by fiddly menus, obtuse tutorials and unforgiving pacing. Although the core mechanics remain the same, the new Just For Fun mode tugs the emphasis away from multi-tasking and layout optimisation and towards checking out the range of available wildlife, giving you a much bigger garden from the off and providing fewer of the game's hurdles, such as attacks from Ruffians and regular visits from Sour Piñata raid-parties. Elsewhere, a new tutorial draws you into the main game far more comfortably, and the option to move your cursor outside of the garden perimeter slims down the UI by allowing options such as crating and dispatching your piñata to escape from the menus and appear as physical objects. It also opens up the often-claustrophobic world of the first game, with new arctic and desert locations which can be visited to lay traps for more exotic animals.

Alongside this, there are the expected additions, including new piñatas, new toys and accessories, and a range of solidly crafted minigames. *Trouble In Paradise* also features co-op play, supporting two local players or four over Xbox Live. While the

ensuing action is likely to turn your well-ordered lawn into a war zone of splinters and twigs, as the garden owner you can at least decide what level of control to grant any visitors, allowing them a full suite of powers or merely giving them the opportunity to watch your careful spadework.

Most of the time, however, this remains a sequel with a suitably Darwinian focus on simple refinement. Part trowel 'em up, part collectathon and part ghoulish, open-air restaurant sim, *Viva Piñata* may still be too quirky for some, but if you've got the stomach for another round of Sparrowmint butchery, it's hard not to recommend another trip to the bottom of the garden. [8]



Minigames include puzzle-like races, where the speed is fixed and victory comes down to selecting the most suitable surface, and the new talent show: The P Factor



Piñata behaviour has been extensively refined, with creatures now copying each other's flourishes on a whim, and a range of new animations that make the menagerie more believable (if that's the right word)



RESET GENERATION

FORMAT: MOBILE, PC RELEASE: OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: NOKIA DEVELOPER: REDLYNX
PREVIOUSLY IN: E189

Reset Generation is a game that shouldn't work. Its kitchen-sink approach to design – piling layer after layer of influence and industry tropes reaching back decades – has been the downfall of countless games before. The introduction of chance elements on top of what might be otherwise finely tuned strategy design should have tipped the game's scales out of the player's hands and toward maddeningly cheap victories.

Instead, the game manages to appear almost effortlessly confident in its disparate, arcane, and by now notoriously difficult-to-describe mechanics, and has coalesced into one of the most vibrant and dynamic action/strategy games in recent memory.

Where it excels is in the gnawing weight of opportunity cost that underpins every decision players make on a second-by-second basis. Bombing a nearby essential item is the only way to shield it from an enemy's cannon, but by refocusing their attention on other elements they might just as assuredly snatch victory from your grip. Luring your foes toward your castle in hopes of a quick kill just inches from your door and the resultant long-distance princess-grab might see you kicked across the board for 'turtling', leaving that door now gapingly unguarded.

Those constant turns of fortune can and will result in decisive losses from the best-laid plans and jaw-dropping wins from hopeless



The space-invading Aggressor, playing here in red, can only be unlocked after completing the most wrenching final levels of the singleplayer campaign, and works as much as an online status symbol as it does anything else

situations. They're precisely what gives the game its immediacy and impact, but they're never a wholesale substitute for or guard against thoughtful manipulation of the board.

That said, *Reset Generation* works best for the titular audience it both celebrates and lampoons: those with a nostalgia for, as its announcer intones at the start of every match, "the playground of our youth", the aspect of "game reality" that harkens back to when it was entirely rational for defeated enemies to become collectable fruit.

The singleplayer campaign does an honest job of carefully introducing individual character powers and new techniques, and provides some of the richest and most satisfying strategy in its latest levels. But *Reset Generation's* unapologetic revelling in its own density and playful esoterica, and sole focus on aggressive competition makes it a daunting proposition for the casual bystander. It will likely remain a game of the hardcore, by the hardcore, for the hardcore.

Put plainly, *Reset Generation* is a game that demands attention: brazenly derived while never feeling derivative, a paragon of complexity out of one-button accessibility, and, while it would have been welcome on any platform, it's precisely the flagship title Nokia both wanted and needed for its upstart N-Gage service. [8]



Nokia promises games of five to ten minutes, but it's not unusual for fourplayer games to last above 20, stretching the limits of mobile convenience. Fortunately, matches continue as normal for remaining players if one drops out

Inexplicable puyo onlookers and play-by-play announcements give the game a subtle air of pride, made real by the availability of video replays of every match on the game's website

Character flaws



Though understandably done to bring unity to the game's aesthetic, it isn't clear that the choice to homogenise solicited characters from celebrity designers like *Red Star* creator Christian Gossett and *Alien Hominid's* Dan Paladin (pictured) into more openly repugnant parody was met with the same spirit of good will, something perhaps hinted at by Paladin's conspicuous absence from the game's credits and promotional materials. It doesn't help that – in contrast to creator Scott Foe's original N-Gage title *Pocket Kingdoms* (E146), which took sharp but good-natured jabs at net culture – *Generation's* characterisations at times approach similarly grotesque lows, awkwardly fumbling Sci-Fi Knight's chastity and making vapid tools of its princesses. Still clever, its humour itches where it could have cut more cleanly.



Nokia's decision to let the PC version work as free advertising was daring, but crossplatform play means matches are available at almost any time, unhindered by the size or location of N-Gage's primary markets



PURE

FORMAT: 360, PS3 (VERSION TESTED), PC
RELEASE: OUT NOW PUBLISHER: DISNEY
DEVELOPER: BLACK ROCK STUDIO PREVIOUSLY IN: E190, E193

If imitation is truly the sincerest form of flattery, by rights there should be a considerable number of employees at EA Canada blushing with modesty. *Pure* is hugely derivative of seminal trick snowboarding game *SSX* and its increasingly gravity-defying sequels, and while this lack of innovation means that ultimately Black Rock Studio's title will never be held in such high regard, its strict adherence to the formula has not gone unrewarded. The pleasure of launching into a panoramic, dolly-zoomed abyss and triggering an implausible series of aerial gymnastics is as primal a thrill as it ever was, and that's no doubt the purity to which the title refers.

For all its inherited unreality, though, there's a pervasive feeling that *Pure* lacks adventure. The circuits are neatly sculpted, altitudinous and objectively stunning, the camera swoops with dramatic urgency and lashings of motion blur, but the overall style and presentation hovers nervously behind the established extreme sports aesthetic – rather than the stark caricatures you'd expect to see hurling themselves off mountains of this size, the cast is a dishearteningly bland collection of baggy-trousered clones.

In its mechanics, *Pure* is extremely competent. An extensive career mode, accessible handling and a no doubt anarchic 16-player online offering make this a realistic threat to *MotorStorm*'s subgenre dominance. While there's inevitable repetition throughout a full campaign, there is a remarkable number of different



Vertigo-inducing jumps are *Pure*'s raison d'être, and there's enormous satisfaction to be had in pulling off a nail-bitingly lengthy trick. Sadly, the specials are the only time the characters display any uniquely identifiable personality

locales distributed across the calendar, all of which are worth working toward simply to absorb the next example of graphical excess. The tiered trick system and boost management will also require some sustained attention – to describe it as sophisticated would be a reach, but balancing the risk and reward of the increasingly elaborate tricks adds a pleasing tactical layer to the otherwise knockabout racing.

Pure is a technically capable and viscerally engaging pastiche of EA Sports Big's glory days, but some will question what it could have become had Black Rock displayed the courage to completely abandon reality. Perhaps it would have felt no less second hand in its successes, but healing the underlying thematic disconnect might have removed those nagging impurities that remain. [7]

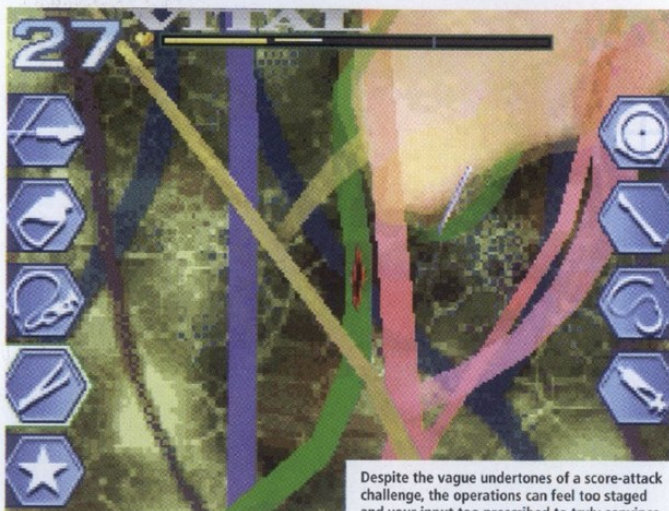


While courses are based on real-world locations, each one has undergone an overhaul of seismic proportions. Capability Brown could scarcely have imagined this much landscape shaping



TRAUMA CENTER: UNDER THE KNIFE 2

FORMAT: DS RELEASE: OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: ATLUS DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE



Despite the vague undertones of a score-attack challenge, the operations can feel too staged and your input too prescribed to truly convince

Master surgeon or perpetual patient? *Trauma Center* has become one of those tragic cases, constantly going in and out of hospital without ever getting any better. What is technically the second DS game plays more like a DS remake of the Wii sequel to the Wii remake of the DS original. Why not tell it to us straight, doctor?

All these second opinions have taken a relatively pure test of arcade reflexes and transformed it into a

mess of old and new ideas, wrapped up in a soap opera saga that would flummox even the most ardent General Hospital fan. Tumours and aneurysms to ease you in, a kidnapping to give you a lock to pick with scalpels, a virus that is GUILT from the earlier games in all but name: for the first time the ratio of new to old is looking a touch peaky.

Under The Knife 2 may liberally borrow, but it has the sense to take only the choice donor cuts. The clean neon visuals of the Wii versions wisely replace the grainy body cavities that added extra strife to the original DS ops. Likewise, the bone reconstruction and transplant operations that impressed so on Wii – largely as diversions to the *Space Invaders* silliness that struck (and indeed, strikes here) at the 11th hour – all appear on DS as decent as ever.

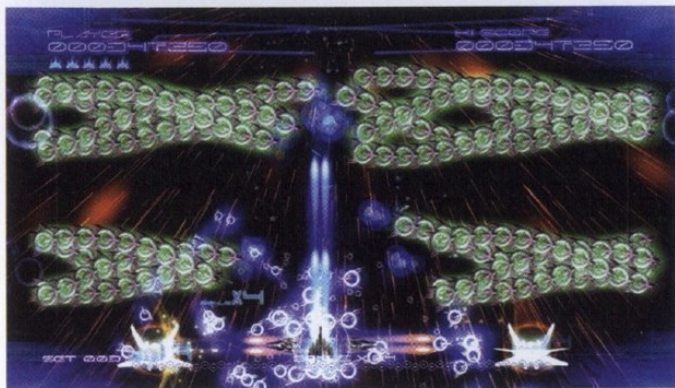
For many, it is the return to stylus control that most excites. The Wii Remote made for an ideal laser simulator, but the plastic DS prong remains the slicing and stitching choice. To tackle the more inventive operations dreamt up for Wii with superior tools will be enough to convince the *Trauma* fans. It is just a shame that after that DS debut – clunky, but full of inventiveness – the series should focus on honing its skills, rather than breaking new medical ground. [6]



Tougher operations, such as the returning skin grafts, benefit from an easy mode. Good news for those nursing broken fingers from the last time

GALAGA LEGIONS

FORMAT: 360 RELEASE: OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: BANDAI NAMCO DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE



Though made by the same Namco team, *Galaga Legions* lacks the purity that made *Pac-Man Championship Edition* so revelatory. As such, it's likely to confound and confuse those who are expecting the sober presentation and pacing of its inspiration: from the off, *Legions* throws a dazzling number of fast-moving enemy ships at the player, all displayed against a psychedelic Minter-esque backdrop.

Legions does, however, take some cues from its source's design. Its ship-capturing mechanic is echoed by the constant presence of two satellites that normally flank your ship but can also be deposited and orientated to shoot up, down, left or right with a flick of the right stick. That mechanic is also mirrored by points in each level at which enemy ships can be recruited to sit in a formation below your own and throw out a storm of fire until they are destroyed by collisions with the enemy. They can also be positioned in a similar manner to your satellites. Finally, the idea of targeting specific enemies in the original is represented in *Legions*



Satellites fire faster the closer they are to the enemy, meaning that you'll need daring runs into dangerous territory to get the most out of them

by the ability to instantly wipe out an entire formation by destroying its 'core' ship.

That last mechanic lies at the heart of the game. By the second level, formations of enemies come so thick and fast that shooting cores is the only way to survive, and knowing where to position the satellites is of paramount importance. *Legions* doesn't quite revolve around pattern learning, however, because of its scoring mechanic. Complex and unintuitive – the very opposite of *Ikaruga*'s beautiful system – it demands that you gather a score multiplier by constantly shooting enemies before going for cores with unmolested formations for larger bonuses. It means that efficient single-life runs can score significantly lower than those comprising multiple deaths and botched attacks.

The result is a wooliness that's perhaps acknowledged by the game rewarding extra lives not for score but on passing stage four of each level. *Legions* is not a beautiful game, nor is it entirely faithful to its name, but it can provide short-term thrills for the visual fireworks on offer. Those looking for a rigorous score-attack challenge should look elsewhere. [6]



By default, *Legions* is skinned with blandly updated ship designs from the original but, surely, few will use these over the more faithfully blocky renditions, which are also easier to discern

CASTLE CRASHERS

FORMAT: 360 RELEASE: OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: THE BEHEMOTH DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE



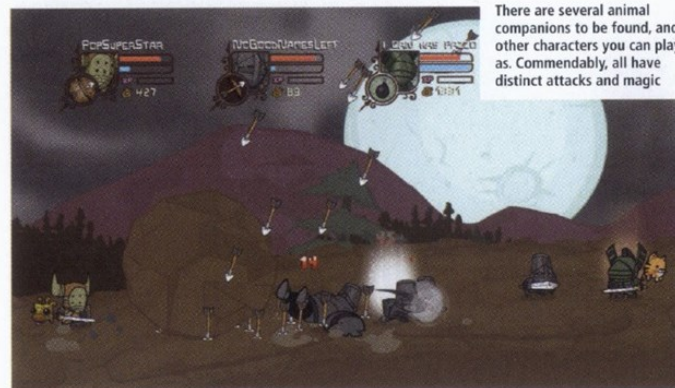
The bosses are the most obvious highlights of *Castle Crashers*: a later battle against a demented painter is particularly memorable

After *Alien Hominid* made gamers across the world cry tears of pain, The Behemoth began work on a side-scrolling XBLA beat 'em up. But it hasn't gone soft. *Castle Crashers* is a portmanteau scroller, taking ideas from across the gamut of the genre and repackaging them with first-class production values. The problem is that scrolling beat 'em ups, even the very best, have a few inherent problems: the main one being repetition – of enemies, of challenges, of level structure, of movesets. Does *Castle Crashers* have any solutions?

It certainly has a bash. The initial relatively standard sections give way to alterations of environment, perspective and objective that, at their feverish best, are breathless. You'll be happily whomping through diminutive enemies one minute, scrabbling away from a screen-filling beastie the next, before surfing some hapless marine life into a confrontation with a monstrous

catfish. You'll cannon-blast into 2D scrolling sections before ruining a bad man's wedding, dodge booby-traps in factories and bounce helpless enemies around with your companions. That latter point, however, is caveat to the whole of *Castle Crashers*: it's at its best in multiplayer, where the occasional misstep in pacing is easily glossed over.

In singleplayer, it's not the same. But there's something else that completely determines what you'll think of *Castle Crashers*: if you were that kid who was pulled away from the *TMNT* cabinets by an angry mum, who couldn't wait for *Golden Axe* to appear on a home console, and who played *Streets Of Rage 2* over and over, *Castle Crashers* is for you. It's from a long-dead genre, but because of that its constant references, both mechanical and stylistic, are as much homage as games can produce. It's not perfect, then, but nor were any of its influences in the first place. [7]



There are several animal companions to be found, and other characters you can play as. Commendably, all have distinct attacks and magic



A fresh perspective lent the Star Wars universe one of its most original stories – and provided the background to its best space combat game

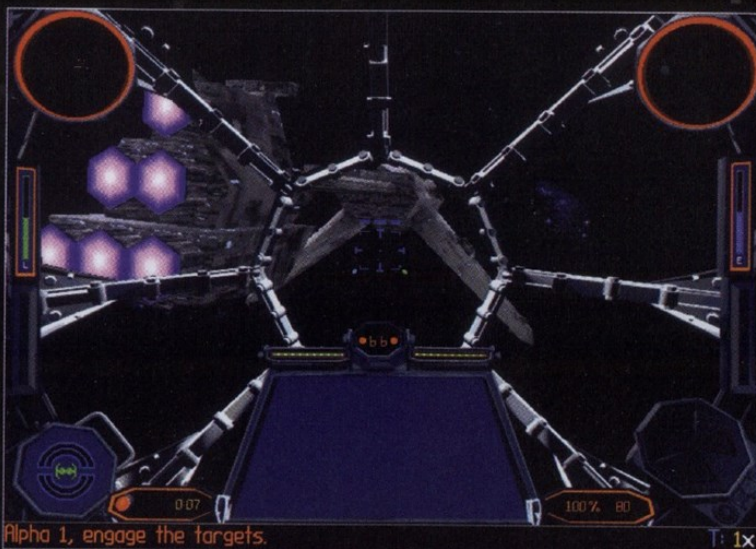
It's all there in its first mission, a scenario formed from the blandest of situations and the pickiest of requirements, but one that unravels into something frenetic and even grand, the start of a journey that takes you through a meticulous and individual vision of the Star Wars universe. It begins with five cargo freighters. It's during the aftermath of the Empire's successful attack on the Rebel base on Hoth, and your superiors suspect that escaping Rebel soldiers have been smuggled aboard one of the freighters. As a rookie member of a TIE Fighter squadron attached to the space station to which these freighters are cruising, you must fly in close to each one before identifying its contents.

Though one, of course, is indeed filled with the scum and a tense dogfight quickly ensues, these opening moments of *TIE Fighter* nevertheless provide a candid look at what must surely be the everyday experience of an Imperial TIE Fighter pilot. Foodstuffs, Rebel officers, weapons – you'll scan them all: you'll come across a lot of craft that need

identifying during your career and, even in this first skirmish, it's mission over should you miss one. After all, with the immense bureaucratic weight of the Empire hanging above all your actions, failure is rarely far away. Go off for a cathartic fight with the Rebel shuttles that come to defend their men and a second batch of transports will likely sail past before you can get to them.

It's also a mission that brutally reveals the perilous existence of a TIE Fighter pilot. After all, you're strapped in to a nimble but horribly fragile craft that's capable of taking no more than a couple of hits before being destroyed. Not that the attacking shuttles are particularly dangerous: your wingmen can ably distract them from you as you zip from ship to ship. More dangerous, in fact, is the madly spiralling wreckage of a shot-down foe, which can take you out in an instant. It's all just as it was in the films but, with the concept of being a small, vulnerable cog in the Imperial fleet now brought into sharp focus, a reversal of that familiar thrill of seeing a TIE sent into oblivion.

TIE Fighter, as *X-Wing* did before it, achieves such depth through attention to detail, though the life of an anonymous helmeted henchman rather than a noble freedom fighter was always going to be a harder sell. And *TIE Fighter* commendably does little to make the Imperial cause sympathetic. Part of what makes *TIE Fighter* still feel so fresh is its stance on a fiction that has, in recent years, tended to bank on the elements that appeared to work well in the original films and fail to bring anything new to the mix. It naturally encompasses the action, drama and geopolitical intrigue you might hope for, but all from a fresh perspective: you're not some Rebel collaborator. As an upstanding member of the Imperial forces, you're keen to restore 'peace and order' in the face of the Rebel insurgency and root out corruption. The game's iconographic introductory yellow scrolling text takes a triumphant stance on the Empire's operation against the Rebel terrorists' Hoth base. Your superiors are efficient officers (with clipped English accents) and cowed servants



Due to both the physical design of the TIE Fighter and also the added PC processing power Totally Games could expect players to have, the default display fills almost the full screen, while it only occupied the top half in *X-Wing*



DEAD AIM

In *TIE Fighter*, if you're not in the right place at the right time, shooting at the right target, then it's usually a mission fail. Thankfully, the game features a suite of tools for tracking all that's going on across the battlefield, in which the action can be spread over five miles in any direction. The targeting system allows you to see what the AI of each craft, both ally and enemy, is doing, what it is targeting and its ETA to that target, while a useful 3D view shows which way it's pointed. Despite the high level of information on offer, even now it's difficult to see what smoke and mirrors the game is using to achieve the intensity of each battle.

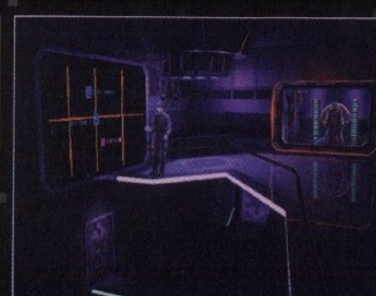
of the Emperor. The pernickety and impatient training simulator tutor says things like: "Delta One, do exactly as you're told, no more, no less", and the tone during missions is decidedly militaristic, with commanders commending you with, "Excellent hunting, Alpha 1".

The story, however, veers away from sending you on an epic campaign against the Rebels. Instead, *TIE Fighter's* story is a vision of the challenge the Empire has to keep order. You're just as likely to be dogfighting with pirates, warring factions and treacherous Imperials. And, best of all, the spectre of morality never raises its head. You carry out your orders, each of which is clear and free from ambiguity. Even when a member of the Secret Order Of The Emperor, a covert Imperial sect that's investigating attempts to oust

You're just as likely to be dogfighting with pirates, warring factions and treacherous Imperials. Best of all, the spectre of morality never raises its head

the Empire's ruling elite, shows up and starts giving you secondary mission objectives that work alongside and sometimes somewhat contrarily to your main ones, you just keep ticking off that order list all the same.

The Order's requests reveal a plot by a renegade Admiral to usurp the Emperor from power, whereupon the story spirals out from fighting Z95 Headhunters and Y-Wings to other TIE Fighters and even Star Destroyers. What seem like side issues during missions, therefore, take new purpose, such as a scenario in which you're asked to break off from the primary



Superlative job! Bonus mission objectives completed.

objective to find a stolen Imperial shuttle containing Rebel officers escaping from Hoth (surely a small allusion to the similar sequence in *Return Of The Jedi*). The overall story isn't affected by your failure to achieve these objectives; the reward, instead, is two sets of decoration: standard medals won through completing missions and achieving your nominal commander's secondary and bonus objectives, and a purple tattoo on your arm that increases in complexity as you achieve more of the Order's, as well as unlocking special cutscenes. It's a low-tech yet elegant

way of making you feel more involved in a plot that's driven by your commanding officers – who are only following immutable scripts created by the game designer anyway.

The team that created WWII-based flight sims such as *Secret Weapons Of The Luftwaffe* made *X-Wing* and *TIE Fighter*, an interesting parallel with George Lucas having based the dogfights in *A New Hope* on those of WWII movies. But because *Star Wars* space battles lack such real-world inconveniences as the ground and stalling, *TIE Fighter's* battles are much closer to the filmic ideal. Without the need to emulate proper space physics, they are close-up and intense, quarry and hunter twisting and turning against a starfield shot through with green and orange laser bolts.



But the great attraction of *TIE Fighter* is that it is, at heart, a simulation, even if it's a simulation of something that doesn't exist. Its depiction of how a starfighter works is coherent and far-reaching, a design based on the fantastical but rooted in logic and game design. Just as the films formed a rich fictional universe through consistency and subtlety in every element onscreen, so too does *TIE Fighter* build a reality of space combat in the details of how the ships work, how other craft behave, and the strategy behind the way the missions are planned.

The premier example is the TIE's power system, a design identical to that in *X-Wing* because, well, it couldn't really be bettered. It supposes that each starfighter



produces a certain amount of energy that can be routed to the engine, shields, lasers and other energy guns that may be present. The balance can be shifted – increasing laser or shield recharge rate takes power from the engines and therefore slows you down, while going top speed means draining energy from your shield or laser reserves. Each battle demands careful strategy: if shields are depleted, laser energy can be desperately piled into them to restock, but you may be left without the ability to fire. Shield energy can also be shifted between the front and rear of the ship – attacking a capital ship bristling with turrets might require all power forward, for instance, but don't neglect your rear when you're powering away again. During battles, therefore, your right hand will be keying in power configurations while your left flies the TIE Fighter, a feat of co-ordination that takes time to learn but is thoroughly satisfying to master.

Such intricacies would mean little without the canvas of *TIE Fighter*'s mission scripting to play against, however. Briefings are soberly diagrammatic, describing carefully planned waves of attacks: Assault Gunboat Tau will destroy the minefield so that Imperial transports can take out the Calamari Cruiser; TIE group Alpha will take out the enemy fighters before a TIE Bomber group comes in to destroy the freighters. They imply a grander strategy, further contextualising your actions, such as a mission in which you are ordered not to kill all enemy ships; your aggression is considered enough to give their commanders a message.

The tight pacing of these choreographed encounters makes their design feel more closely related to the halls and corridors of an FPS than empty space. And yet they come with emergent complexity that sees plans go awry, with you the centrepiece of getting things back on track, and clear orders obscured by the density of action around you. Juggling your shields and jinking your ship around to avoid the shots of the A-Wings on your tail while lining up your reticle on your target, and all the while making sure you're aware what's happening throughout the whole skirmish – that your capital ship isn't under fire, that a group of enemy shuttles isn't getting away. It gets intense.

So why is it better than *X-Wing*? It's isn't just the smoothed 3D graphics, improved map, targeting systems and AI – it's the danger of piloting an unshielded TIE Bomber against an assault transport, which features a rear-mounted turret. It's about getting your hands on the military hardware that the Empire can bring to bear on its enemies. It's about the storytelling woven around and through the missions. It's about being a cog in the Imperial machine. Your masters are hard to please and you'll be rescued from countless sparking fighter wrecks, but they sure give out some great jobs.



POINT AND CLICK

True to many PC flight and space combat games of the era, including Origin Systems' *Wing Commander* and *Wings Of Glory*, *TIE Fighter* features 2D scenes reminiscent of graphic adventure games that allow access to its combat schools, new missions, the saved mission theatre and other game features. Animated with a mixture of drawn and prerendered sequences, they allow the game to flow smoothly between combat and the Imperial base. Cutscenes are well-voiced and efficiently scripted given how little space there was to store them at the time.

Moving up from the lightly armed and barely protected TIE Fighters and Bombers, to the Assault Gunboat (below) and TIE Interceptor, TIE Advanced right to the indomitable TIE Defender, presented a much better progression than *X-Wing* provided







THE MAKING OF... **DEUS EX MACHINA**

Some of Shakespeare's most famous work expressed via 8bit gameplay, with Ian Dury on the soundtrack. Welcome to the mind of Mel Croucher

FORMAT: C64/SPECTRUM PUBLISHER: AUTOMATA UK (ELECTRIC DREAMS, C64) DEVELOPER: AUTOMATA UK ORIGIN: UK RELEASE DATE: 1984 (1985, C64)

Long before Looking Glass' modern classic redefined a genre, there was another *Deus Ex*. One that baffled, amused, provoked and proselytised ages before the term 'multimedia' was beginning to tumble from the lips of marketing execs across the land. Conceived by one of the industry's genuine pioneers, **Mel Croucher**, the game fused music with graphics, freedom with constraint, and Frankie Howerd with an Orwellian nightmare. You can talk about mutant camels, things on springs and *Pyjamaramas* all you like, but Croucher's oeuvre delivered weirdness on a completely different scale.

Before *Deus Ex Machina*, Croucher had already piqued and perplexed the world with *Pimania* (1982) and *My Name Is Uncle Groucho, You Win a Fat Cigar* (1983), two titles that not only stimulated intellects with pun-heavy text and esoteric exploration but also offered prizes to those with the stamina

they treated me like mad people are treated. Some pretended it wasn't happening, some tried to throw me out of the magic kingdom, and some were kind and let me sleep with their mothers. When I just kept on producing my stuff, things changed, and they treated me like some sort of holy fool, until eventually I was

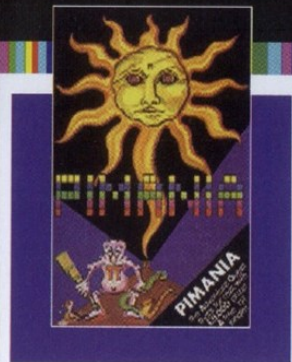
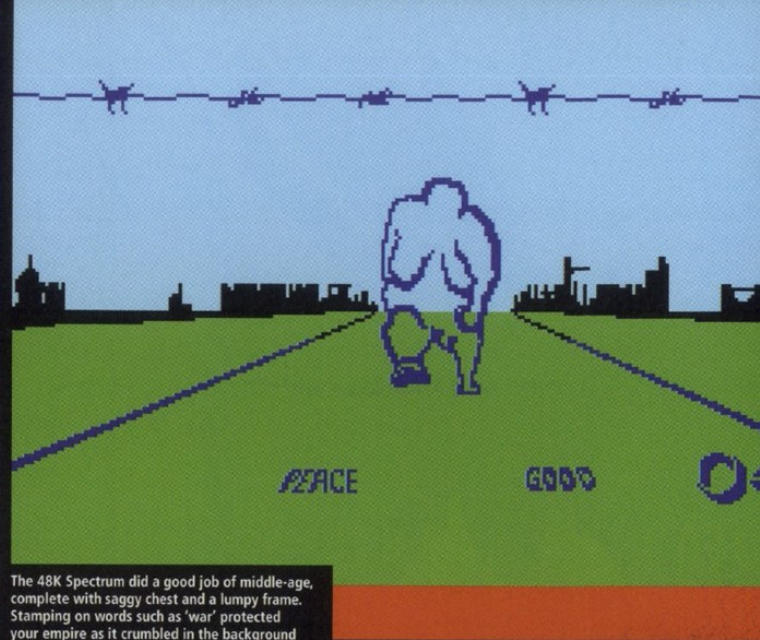
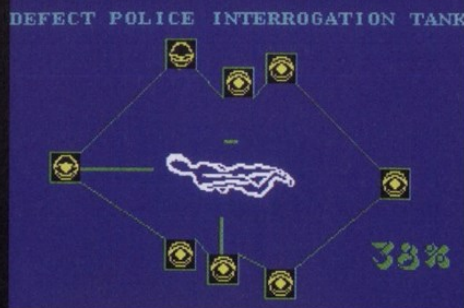
"How did they react to someone trying to turn the Bible into a musical comedy for the ZX81? They thought I was mad, of course"

to delve deep enough into their tortured logic.

Croucher rightly remains a proud father to his early games, though acceptance didn't come easy. "How did they react to someone trying to turn the Bible into a musical comedy for the ZX81?" he asks. "They thought I was fucking mad, of course. And

acclaimed as a cult, worshipped as a saint, a legend, a god."

Croucher was in a unique position at the dawn of home computing. Having already worked in architecture and advertising, the idea of combining cassette-tape commentaries and aerial photography for travel guides had already made the polymath enough money to quit architecture by 1977. The next step was utilising computer data for on-air treasure hunts and competitions, two obsessions that were to feed into his early games.



TREASURE HUNT

Croucher's early games attempted to break out of traditional modes of play by encouraging customers to continue the quest in the real world. *Pimania* (1982) offered as a prize the Golden Sundial of Pi, supposedly worth £6,000, that would be awarded to the person who turned up in the right place at the right time after solving riddles inside the game. But as the years passed the prize had still not been claimed, provoking claims it was all a scam.

However, on July 2 1985 (pi = 22 over 7), nearly three years after the game's release, two teachers from Ilkley stood at the mouth of a horse cut into the chalk of a hill near the village of Alfriston on the Sussex Downs, and were greeted by the surreal sight of the Piman himself emerging from some nearby bushes accompanied by his own signature tune. The Piman was Croucher's business partner, Christian Penfold, dressed in a costume, and the prize had been duly won. "I didn't have the heart to tell them the exact location was in the horse's arse," says Croucher today.

"By the time Uncle Clive came up with the ZX80, I already had the entertainment cassette thing going," he states. "Plus a ready-made team of great creatives and shite salesmen. Nothing was ever to change. I woke up one morning and found myself midwife to a new sort of industry – one where people were happy to pay a fiver or a tenner for a hand-copied cassette stuffed with quirky little entertainments squished into 1K of computer data, and soon 8K, and eventually 24K. Great days."

But while *Pimania* and *My Name Is Uncle Groucho* made a big splash for Croucher's company, Automata Software, it was *Deus Ex Machina* that was to become the company's most talked-about work. Programmed by 'youth opportunity hireling' Andy Stagg, with cover artwork by 'fellow loony' Robin Evans, it was

nonetheless Croucher who devised and oversaw the project.

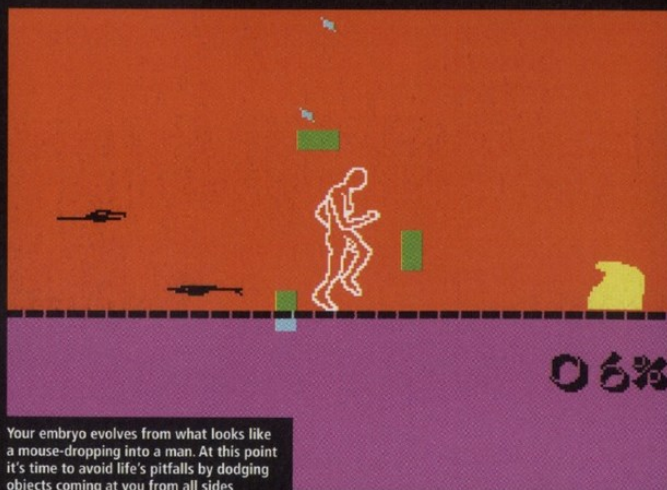
"I decided the time had come to go for it. *Deus Ex Machina* was either going to be my Orson Welles landmark or my Orson Cart disaster. I wrote *Deus* as a screenplay in about a week, then I used felt pens and graph paper to hand draw all the graphics pixel by pixel. I worked out the gameplay and interaction and typed out the instructions for the programmer a bit like a stage production. It took a month to write and record the music. The reason it took that long was because I played all the instruments myself and I was a rubbish musician – so it took ages to edit out all the bum notes."

But what exactly is the game? It's a question that has been asked before, and today Croucher dismisses it as "irrelevant". Looked

along with Croucher's own distinctly discordant and eerie musical meanderings.

"It was simply a series of mechanisms to get you immersed in the audiovisuals," recalls Croucher. "I used a sequence of progressive gameplay, nothing very original, but that wasn't the point. Books, movies and theatre are also a series of unoriginal sequences. It's the recombination and original presentation that creates a classic. I wanted to take the player along for the ride, but allow them to control the way they reached their inevitable destination. From the fertilisation of the egg by the sperm, through your own birth, and then the entire process from cradle to grave, it pretty much wrote itself."

"I think my favourite sequence is the end sequence, where you have grown old and become a



Your embryo evolves from what looks like a mouse-dropping into a man. At this point it's time to avoid life's pitfalls by dodging objects coming at you from all sides

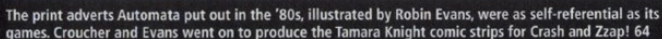
"I know nothing about games now, apart from the fact that it costs large amounts of money to produce the same old shit"

at in blunt terms, *Deus Ex Machina* sees you nurturing a human organism from the cradle to the grave through minigames inspired by the seven ages of man speech from Shakespeare's *As You Like It*. Try pitching that to a publisher nowadays.

Of particular interest is the audio cassette tape that was packaged alongside the game. Designed to be played perfectly in sync with the stages, it contained the vocal talents of Jon Pertwee, Frankie Howerd and Ian Dury,

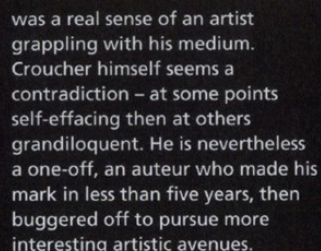
decrepit old husk, trying to stay alive with blood-clot busters, and then the whole notion that it's too late to learn from your mistakes – except it isn't, because imagine if this was nothing more than a computer game, and you can start all over again. I haven't reached that stage yet, but it's close."

If all this sounds high-concept, demanding and ahead of its time, then, yes, it was all those things and more. *Deus Ex Machina* could also be annoying and not a little repulsive – one of Croucher's main

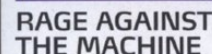


Synchronising the audio accompaniment to the peculiar onscreen action was a thrilling notion to computer gamers accustomed to *Haunted Hedges* and *Horace & The Spiders*. Jon Pertwee would even count down each sequence in his trademark Dr Who tones, ensuring players remained on the same page. "Jon Pertwee was a joy to work with," recalls Croucher. "He arrived two hours late, and I thought he was an arrogant sod for keeping us all waiting as I was hiring the studio by the hour. When he eventually arrived, he was dressed in brown leather and wearing a crash helmet, limping badly. He said he'd fallen off his Harley-Davidson while racing Sir Ralph Richardson on their way to the studios. He was no spring chicken, but he did it in a single take, and it was absolutely perfect. No cuts, no dubs, no edits. Brilliant."

Croucher's games may have had the same surrealist, almost Pythonesque streak often associated with British eccentrics but there was also something more: a desire to kick us out of our complacent acceptance of dogma and cant. Beyond all the whimsy and weirdness there

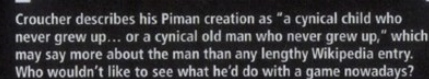


"After *Deus Ex Machina* I sold Automata for ten pence," he concludes. "That's what it was worth. There was never any money. Somehow we gave it all away by being deliberately silly. Well, not that silly – I retained all the rights to my games... I know nothing about the computer games industry now, apart from the fact that it costs large amounts of money to pay large teams of people for several years to produce the same old shit. I am amazed that there have been no major innovations emanating from mavericks and independents, and I hope the web will allow this to happen, just as it has with independent music. Corporations seem to think they control creative output, but it doesn't have to be like that."



There was a strong anti-authority, anti-violence streak in many of Croucher's games, something he still feels strongly about: "At least when I was churning out the antidote to violent games my enemies were only armed with crudely pixelated blobs and a bit of white noise. An entire generation has now been conditioned into associating killing with winning. Violence is seen as a natural route to glamour, kudos and success. The military uses off-the-shelf 'games' to train its personnel. That speaks for itself. Today's simulations of violence exploit amazingly realistic graphics and digital audio. Tomorrow's will feature total immersion techniques and fantasy will blur with reality. The battle is already lost."

Today, Croucher runs an internet marketing and creative company (www.melcroucher.com).



Codeskop

Tracking developments in development

A sense of Unity

A Danish middleware company has moved from its web tools origins to successfully ride the current waves of casual gaming and MMOGs

It's a mark of how buoyant gaming culture has become that there's now little differentiation between the games played by those one-time extreme player definitions, the casual and the hardcore. From *SingStar* to *Wii Sports*, *Buzz!* to *Wii Fit*, not to mention *Nintendogs*, *Bejeweled* and *Peggle*, there may be fewer of the old core ten-to-25-year-old males playing, but they're still significant. And girls under ten or women over 35 play just as frequently, and with as much commitment. (Significantly, casual players don't play hardcore games:

that part of the conventional wisdom is still being maintained.)

It's a change that's being reflected on the margins of the middleware market too. Technology that once upon a time would have been considered somehow not hardcore enough is competing with the big boys of game engine licensing. You could argue that the transformation is now, in part, powered in this way as the one-time providers of tools for casual game development slowly move into the main PC, online and console markets, bringing their clients with them.

One good example is Danish outfit

"The volume of licences we sell to the indies means they're just as important to us as bigger companies"

www.unity3d.com

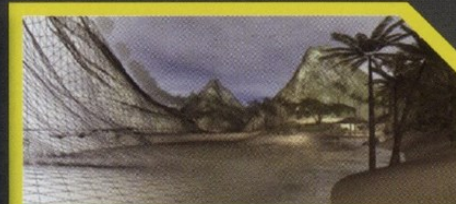
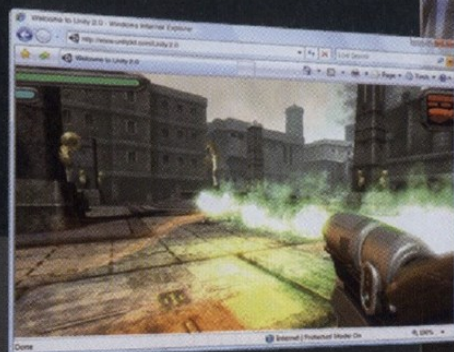
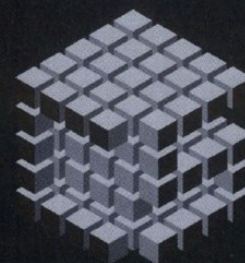


You can bake lightmaps into scenes, while realtime lighting is also available. Unity's ShaderLab language supports technologies such as Cg and GLSL, and offers a fully integrated editor, in which you can visually drag assets and objects to assign such things as textures, behaviours and scripts

Unity Technologies. Starting out in the traditional manner were two technology students trying to make their first game. Trained in proper software development techniques, they planned well, beginning on the tools they would need to create their masterpiece. But somewhere along the line, they discovered that making tools was more exciting than making their game. Combined with what CEO **David Helgason** calls "a big gaping hole in the web market," their efforts quickly coalesced into Unity.

Originally launched as a Mac-based integrated creation tool and game engine for games that worked with a browser-based plug-in, it sat firmly in the same space as technologies such as Director and other Flash-based tools.

Coming from a tiny upstart company, it was vital Unity worked as simply as possible, at least for gamers. The 3MB plug-in worked with all browsers and, crucially, didn't require you to reload your webpage, much less restart your browser or enter any registration details. Additional streaming functionality allowed for the further reduction of load times; something given away by the



overall high quality of the graphics. The final key was the pricing: a \$200 indie licence per seat for companies with turnover of less than \$100,000; a \$1,600 pro licence; or the most expensive \$2,000 licence, which also includes an integrated version control server.

All told, then, it's no surprise that year on year Unity has been growing from a secret success story into an ever more public one. As Helgason reveals, Unity is currently being used to create three game portals, five virtual worlds, and two MMOGs (Cartoon Network's *FusionFall* and an as-yet-unannounced casual game from *Age Of Conan* publisher Funcom), while there are also several venture capital-funded projects making use of the technology, not to mention the thousands of licences sold to everyone from bedroom coders to established game studios.

"It's a interesting situation because while the bigger professional teams will be spending tens of thousands of dollars on licences, it's still not really enough that we're married to them," he laughs. "They don't have a lot of power over us and the volume of licences we sell to the indies means they're just as important to us as the bigger companies."

There are other business implications from the model too. The 20-strong company, which splits development duties between studios in Denmark and Lithuania, plus a sales office in San Francisco, has only one full-time support person. It's something that's forced it to focus on ensuring the stability of releases, as well as nurturing a strong community.

"Because there are a lot of people who pay us not much money, we have to focus on documentation, stability and community," Helgason says. "So if there are problems, people either fix it themselves or get support from the

community and everyone benefits. Of course, maybe it's our fault so we fix the bug and, again, everyone benefits."

What makes Unity particularly emblematic of today's gaming culture, however, is the way it has moved from its web-player roots. First up was the ability for developers to create standalone PC and Mac games. Nothing too difficult there, although neat cross-platform features such as optimised graphics pipelines for DirectX 9 and OpenGL helped. Meanwhile, June saw the announcement of the company's official status as a middleware provider for Wii, while there's a current internal push to complete support for iPhone.

"iPhone is really interesting," Helgason says. "It seems Apple is incredibly open to the development community so it's a great platform for us, and the nice thing is people can start using the current version of Unity and know their code will work on iPhone. There will obviously be some extra channels in terms of multiple input and touchscreen so there will be some adaptation, but there are lots of possibilities. For example, you'll be able

to hook your iPhone into your Mac and prototype directly inside Unity using the iPhone as an input device."

Of course, iPhone provides the clearest path for casual web developers to get their games on another relatively open platform, but studios are also using Unity to develop Wii titles. And the company expects to add support for other consoles. "With the consoles, we're not looking to run in the browser," Helgason points out. "We're standalone on Wii. We expose the shaders so you can access them directly and we'll try to do the same on the other consoles in terms of their specific features."

But perhaps the biggest shift in terms of Unity's professional status and number of commercial users is also the most prosaic. Currently a Mac-only platform, Helgason knows it must finally embrace Windows. "It's a very, very high priority," he grimaces. "It's a lot of work and it's having to happen alongside all the other development work, but being a Mac-only tool is limiting. Our most pessimistic view is we'll triple sales on the day we release the Windows version." Bill Gates would be proud.

Unity 2.1: The newest breed

The latest release of Unity focuses on features that have been developed for studios using the technology to make MMOGs or virtual worlds. Key among these is asset streaming, which enables you to funnel in more content as players move through the online world and it's required. This includes assets such as textures, models, animations and terrain geometry. Unity Technologies is working on procedural technology to further reduce the time required to download models, textures and animations. For example, the asset processing pipeline has pre- and post-processing steps to ensure you can make the most out of any potential repetition or slight variation of assets. "We already compress things a lot but there are techniques you can use to compress assets by astronomical levels," says David Helgason. "For example, it's ridiculous how much you can compress assets if you generate your textures instead of painting them."

Studio profile

Like Top Trumps, but for game dev

■ **NAME:** Zoë Mode Entertainment Ltd

■ **DATE FOUNDED:** 2004 (rebranded as Zoë Mode in March 2007)

■ **NUMBER OF EMPLOYEES:** 145

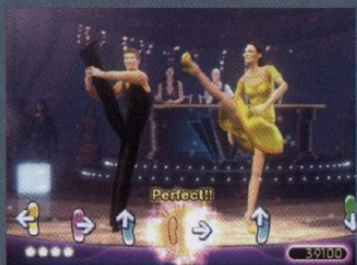
■ **KEY STAFF:** Ed Daly (studio head), Nick Rodriguez (studio head, London), Martin Newing and Paul Mottram (executive producers), Phil Rutherford (technical director), Ste Curran (creative director), Ben Hebb (art director), Ciaran Walsh (audio director), Angela Fenge (operations and marketing director)



■ **URL:** www.zoemode.com

■ **SELECTED SOFTOGRAPHY**

EyeToy Play series from *Play 3* to present; *SingStar* on PS2 from *SingStar Rocks* to present; *Crush*; *Dancing With The Stars*



Zoë Mode's Brighton HQ, top, has seen the development of many party and music games, including *Dancing With The Stars*. The developer will open a second studio in London this year

zoë Mode



■ **LOCATION:**
Brighton and
London, UK

■ **CURRENT PROJECTS:**

EyeToy: Play Hero, *Rock Revolution*, *You're In The Movies*, *Disney Sing It*, *Dancing With The Stars: Get Your Dance On*

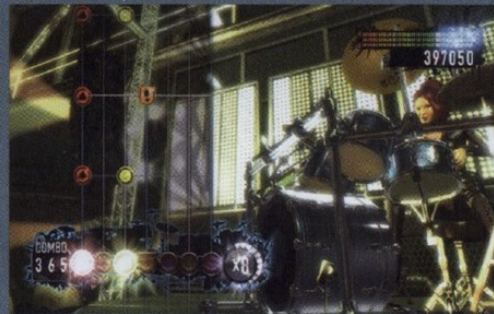
■ **ABOUT THE STUDIO**

"Zoë Mode (formerly Kuju Brighton) was founded in 2004. The studio had a close relationship with Sony Computer Entertainment Ltd Europe, working on both the *EyeToy Play* series and *SingStar* for PlayStation 2.

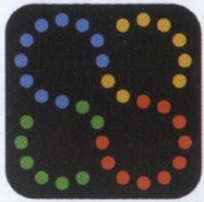
"In March 2007 the studio rebranded as Zoë Mode, and established its goal to be the world's leading independent developer of music and party games. In broadening the definition of the videogame and the videogamer the studio is determined to build a more diverse workforce, including an increased proportion of female developers. Zoë Mode

has since reviewed its hiring practises to engage more staff from outside the industry and introduced the 'Agile' methodology across projects with a view to empowering teams and making the studio a fulfilling place to work.

"Since the rebranding in March 2007 the studio has grown dramatically, with over 140 staff now working from its central Brighton offices on a variety of music and party games for top-rated publishers around the world. With a new London studio announced and a new bespoke Brighton office opening in late September, Zoë Mode is poised for even greater growth and success in 2009."



Rock Revolution, which will be published by Konami, will feature persistent online scoreboards, DLC and a drum peripheral created by real musicians



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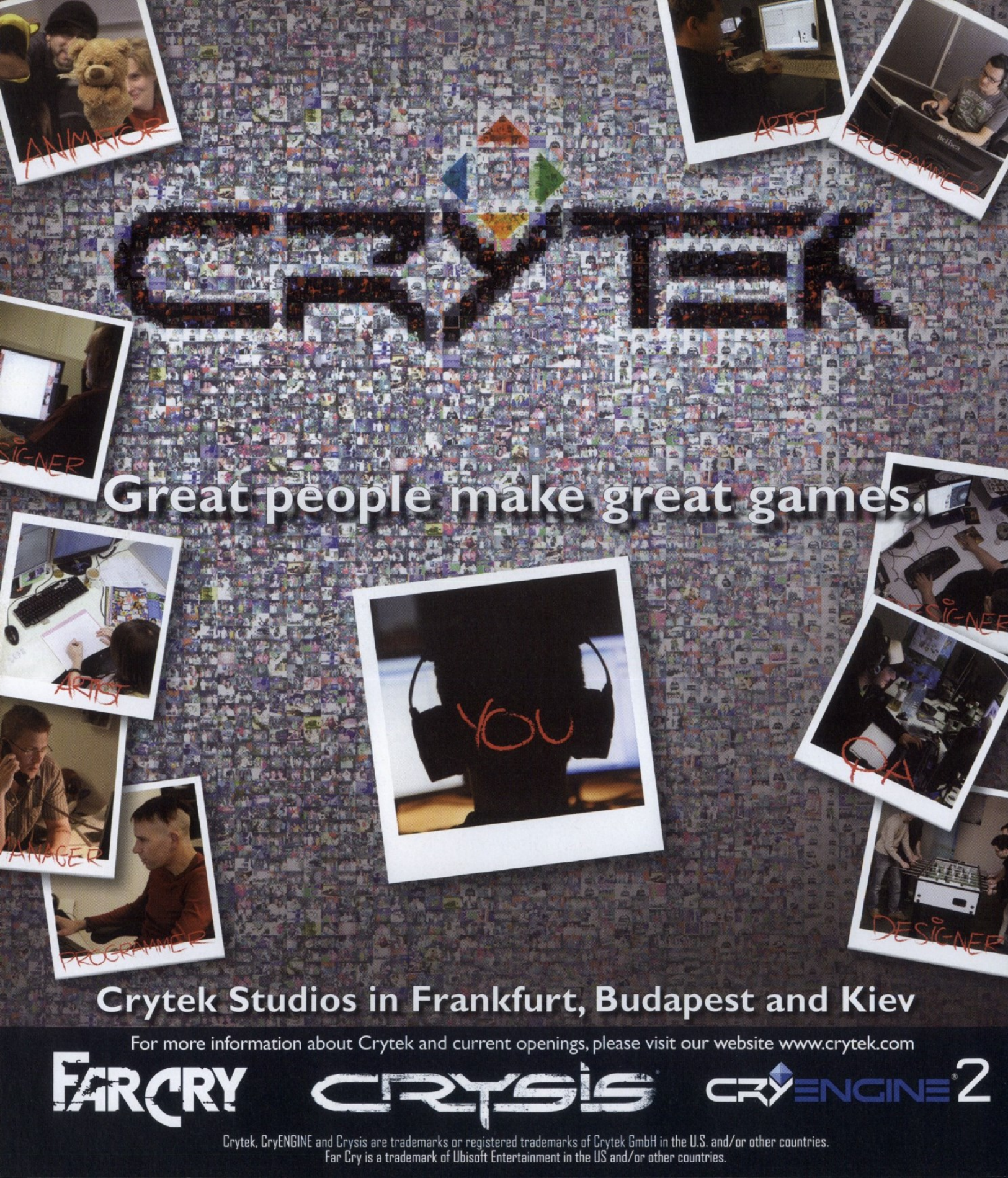
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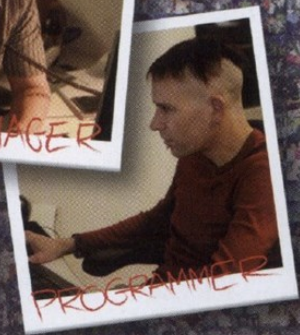
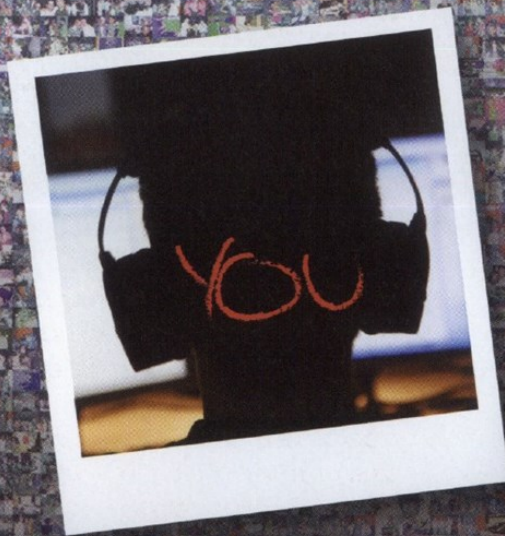
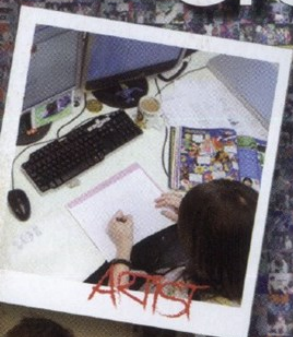


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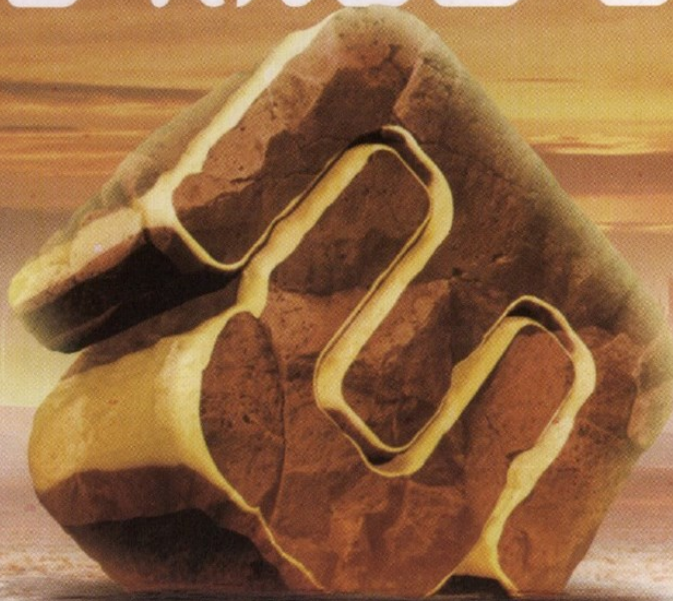
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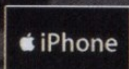
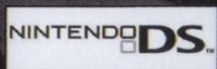
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REGION SPECIFIC: MONTREAL, CANADA

Think of Montreal and your mind may turn to the Just For Laughs Comedy Festival or the Canadian Grand Prix, but the city has plenty of tricks up its sleeve, not least the ability to foster enough knowhow and creativity to produce four of the biggest-selling games of 2007: *Assassin's Creed*, *Rainbow Six: Vegas 2*, *Army Of Two* and *Ghost Recon: Advanced Warfighter 2*.

Offering the kind of economic incentives that would put a Tory investor's offshore haven to shame, Montreal has changed beyond recognition in the last ten years, at least in terms of its game development scene. With tax breaks of up to 37.5 per cent, digital media companies are increasingly flocking to the area. Ironically – and it's a point of much amusement among the Brits working at the company – Eidos' fabulously appointed new studio is located in the Gordon Brown building in the downtown area of the city.

But to say that tax breaks alone built the game economy here would be a gross oversimplification. As you'll discover in this edition of Region Specific, creativity, style and technical excellence inform and influence all aspects of Montreal life, and that is reflected not just in the quantity of the games produced here, but in their quality.



124 THE DEVELOPMENT SCENE IN MONTREAL: AN OVERVIEW



128 MONTREAL'S MOVERS AND SHAKERS TALK SHOP



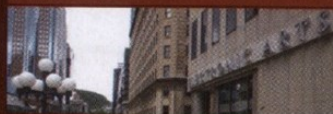
136 STUDIO PROFILE: EA MONTREAL



140 STUDIO PROFILE: ARTIFICIAL MIND AND MOVEMENT



143 STUDIO PROFILE: UBISOFT



145 STUDIO PROFILE: EA MOBILE



147 STUDIO PROFILE: EIDOS MONTREAL

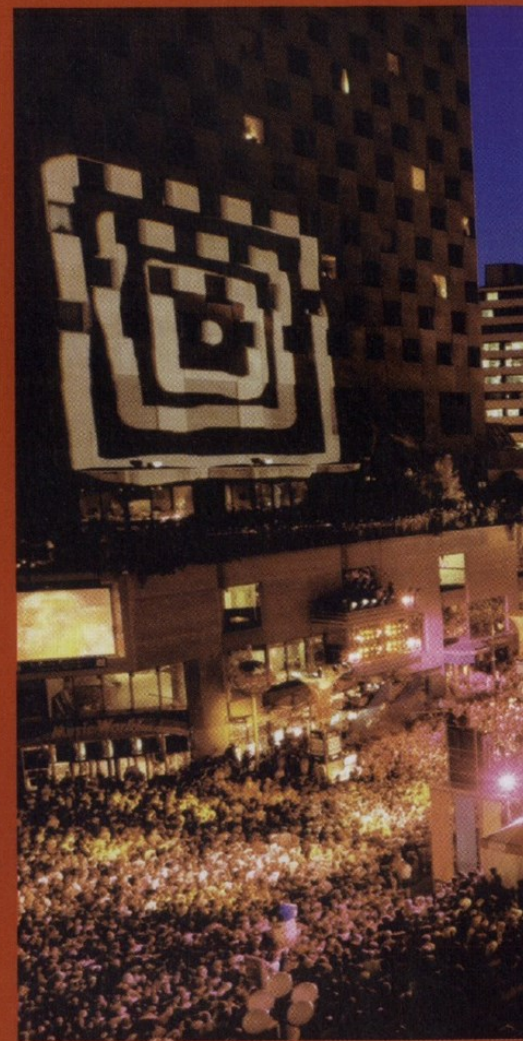
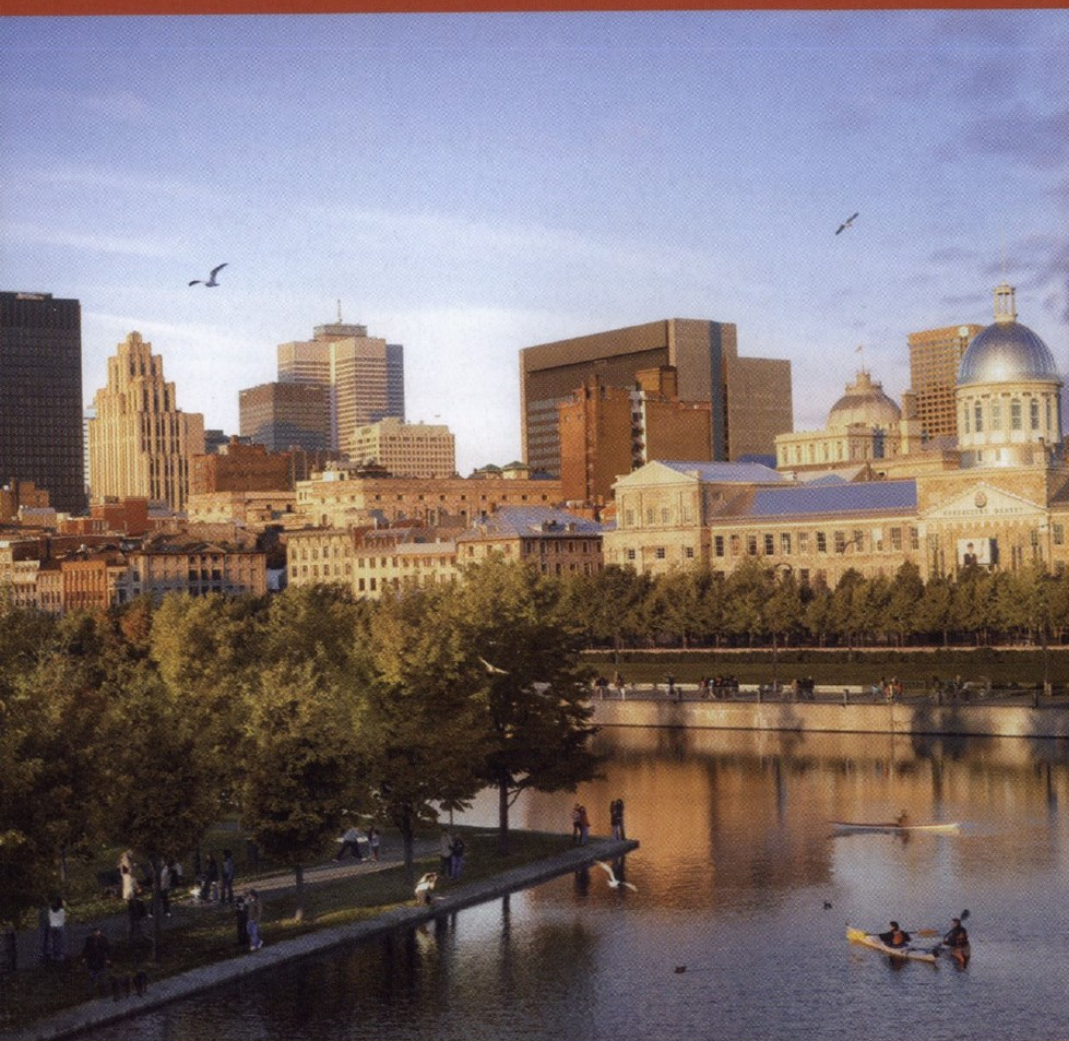


149 STUDIO PROFILE: BABEL MEDIA



150 DIRECTORY: WHO'S WHO, AND WHERE TO FIND THEM





CANADA HIGH

India and China are most often associated with aggressive game dev expansion, but the province of Quebec proves it's no slouch when it comes to rampant recruitment

Ten years ago Montreal was relatively unknown in terms of its game development output; now it is considered a Mecca. With big hitters such as EA, Ubisoft and Eidos establishing some of the biggest studios in the world here, and independents like Grip Entertainment, A2M and Airborne Entertainment fast on their heels, it's become one of the most desirable places to make games in the western hemisphere.

But pumping out product is not what this region is all about, with highly acclaimed titles such as *Assassin's Creed* and the *Prince Of Persia* franchise testament to the area's creative energy and IT infrastructure. It is a region that

generates almost as much new IP as it does licences and sequels.

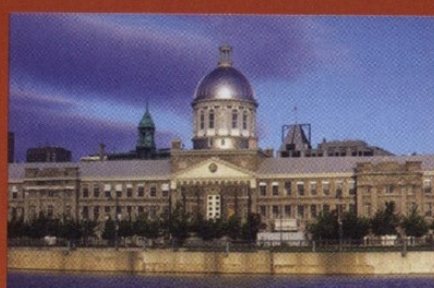
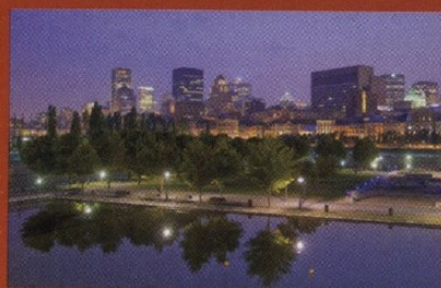
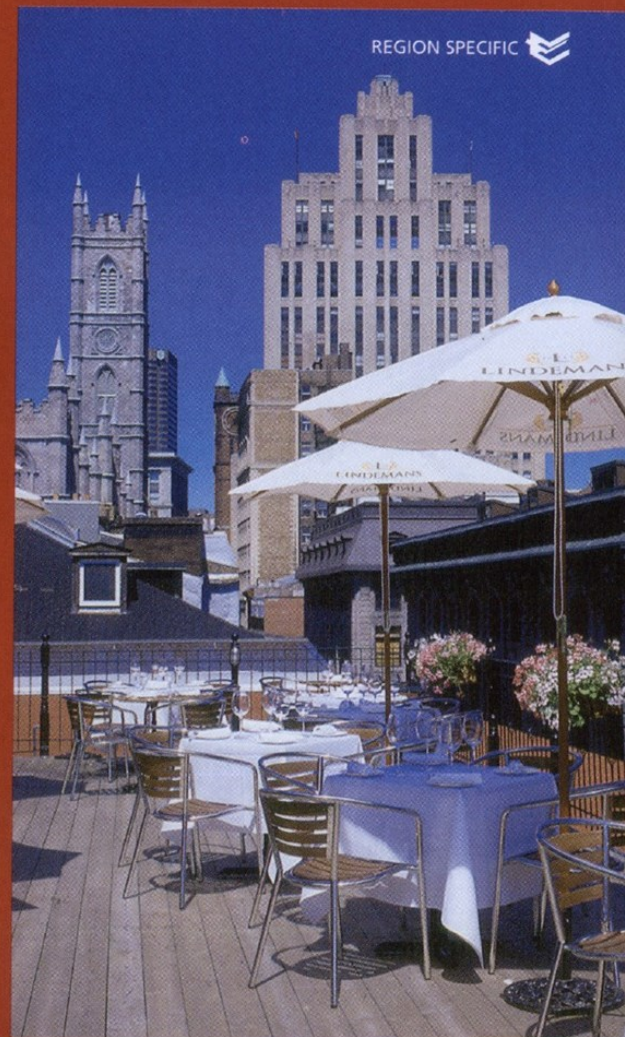
"What we found here that made us stay is the talent that we've found," asserts **Yannis Mallat**, CEO of Ubisoft Montreal. "This helped us to make triple-A games and put Montreal on the map. We've been talking a lot about Montreal in the last six or seven years, and games like *Splinter Cell* and *Prince Of Persia* were part of that. But it is all thanks to the talent and the quality here."

The city's creative energy and vitality can be seen on every street corner and in every town square; artists and musicians naturally flock to the area and

its arts festivals are world renowned. Montreal has always been a forward-looking region and is a respected world leader in industries such as aeronautics, medicine and biotechnology.

So why is Montreal so strong in both the arts and the sciences? There can be no definitive answer, though many locals believe its diverse history and rich cultural heritage must be a powerful factor. The offspring of a union between European charm and North American attitude, Montreal boasts 80 distinct ethnic cultures – ample proof of its right to the moniker 'international city'.

To put this into perspective, it's possible to readily find fine gourmet restaurants offering authentic



Japanese, Indian, Italian, French, Chinese, Thai and British cuisine all on the same 100-yard strip. In the world's second largest francophone city after Paris, Montrealers can be charming, and are very often

"We've been talking a lot about Montreal over the last six or seven years, and games like Splinter Cell and Prince Of Persia have been part of that"

multilingual. The cosmopolitan centre is complemented by Old Montreal, crammed with traces of more than 350 years of history and some of the most stunning cathedrals, museums and commercial Victorian buildings in North America. Its

avant-garde spirit has not gone unnoticed: in 2006 Montreal was named UNESCO City of Design.

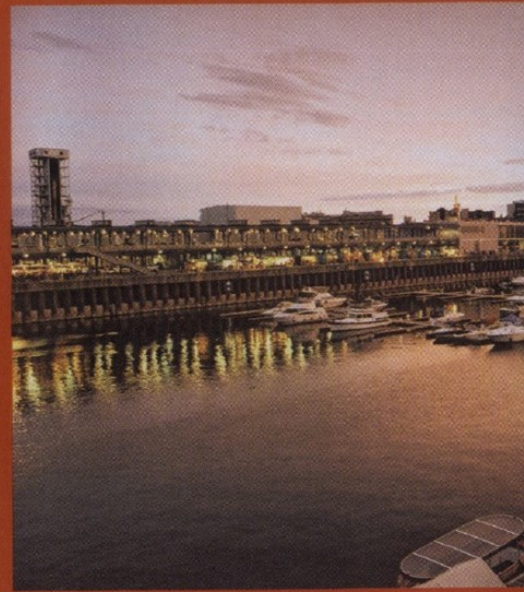
The weather also has a huge impact on both work and play here – you won't go for much longer than

five minutes without someone bringing up the climate (perhaps one reason why so many Brits feel at home here). As one guidebook puts it, 'the summer is a three-month day parole, so we savour it to the max'. With approximately three months of the year

(December to February) taken up with extreme chills and winter snows, Montrealers make the most of their summer when it does arrive.

This burst of seasonal activity is bookended by the Canadian Grand Prix in early June and the Montreal World Film Festival at the end of August. Between these two events there is a staggering amount of festivals and parties to choose from. These include the Just For Laughs Comedy Festival, The Montreal Jazz Festival, the Fringe Festival and the Baroque Festival. In terms of absorbing a kaleidoscope of artistic influences, few cities can compete.

Which brings us to the factor that perhaps defines and influences Montreal game development more



than any other: tax breaks. While the east coast of America and the south of England have their fair share of high-profile development houses, they can't hope to compete with Montreal in terms of cost efficiency. In 1997 the Quebecois government began offering tax breaks of up to 50 per cent for multimedia enterprises, meaning huge studios have relocated to the region in the last ten years. Though that percentage was pulled back to 37.5 per cent in 2003 the lure is still, obviously, very strong.

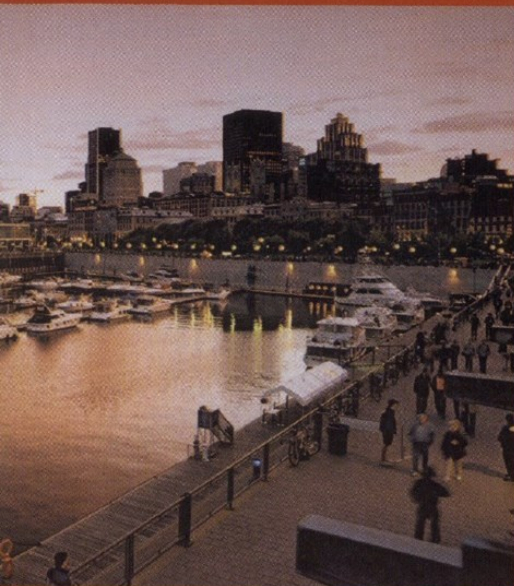
"When you think about it, two of the biggest software companies in the world are right here, within a few blocks," notes **Alain Tascan**, director general of EA Montreal. "We have Softimage and

Autodesk. And then the third one – Alias Wavefront – is 600 miles away or so. There's definitely a history of digital image and special effects companies."

The game development community in Montreal is also powered by Alliance Numérique, an organisation that boasts over 200 members and which has accelerated the business network for Quebec's new media and interactive digital content companies. Along with co-developing government initiatives and encouraging shared goals, Alliance Numérique also organises the Montreal International Game Summit every November, which is fast becoming a key date for industry movers and shakers.

There are several reasons, then, for Montreal looking like a good place to relocate. "Vancouver was looked at and Austin was looked at," explains **Stephane D'Astous**, director general of Eidos Montreal when asked about his company's decision to choose the city. "There were several reasons, but Montreal's digital history and talent pool was clearly a major factor. We also knew that people would want to come here and experience such a vibrant city."

Downsides to the region? Some will point to the extreme winters, which can see snowdrifts reach the rooftops and a wind chill factor of -30. But most developers we talked to – many of them expatriated Brits – believe that bad winters are overstated (usually



by locals who have endured them all their lives). Keep a separate wardrobe for your winter clothes and a spare set of winter tyres in the garage is sound advice for anyone living here, however.

The Quebecois government began offering tax breaks of up to 50 per cent for multimedia enterprises, meaning huge studios relocated to the region

And prospective residents shouldn't forget the upside of the seasonally snowy conditions: skiing is available just 45 minutes away (or two-and-a-half hours for the big hills), and the city's been practically winter-proofed from the really bad conditions. Not

only are snowdrifts cleared away with the kind of ruthless efficiency of which Canadians are proud, but the city boasts an underground metro system and shopping district that's over 40 miles long. It's

possible to spend hours browsing through shops, take in a movie, eat at a gourmet restaurant and even drop by a lap-dancing bar (Montreal has an almost Parisian appetite for lurid peep shows) all without putting your head above street level.

With its 24-hour party atmosphere, ethnic diversity and untrammelled creative energy, Montreal clearly has much going for it. As a hub of game development it used to be something of an industry secret, but no more: Ubisoft plans to expand, Eidos is recruiting fast, and outsourcing specialist Babel Media is finding that it cannot keep up with demand.

Other world economies may be in the doldrums, but Montreal is shrugging off such negativity. As a community it is alive to the challenges ahead and, perhaps more importantly, values its history of respect for people from all walks of life and cultures. Just don't forget to pack your duffle coat if you head out here any time after November.





Lewis Glover (director of QA, Babel Media Montreal)

Yannic Mallat (CEO, Ubisoft Montreal)

Dr. Paul Kruszewski (president, Grip Entertainment)

Andre Lauzon (executive producer, EA Mobile)

EAST COAST

How has Montreal risen to become one of the most powerful game dev centres in the west? We talk shop with some of the region's biggest names to find out

Make no mistake: ten years ago a roundtable discussion with such notable publishers and developers in Montreal simply wouldn't have been possible. But thanks to proactive government initiatives, the Quebec region of Canada – Montreal in particular – has been transformed from a sleepy digital village into a hub of game development. We sat down with some of the key players in the area to discuss recruitment, creativity, and why hockey has such an influence on working life.

Do you think Montreal has a particular strength or identity in terms of game development?

Stephane D'Astous: When people ask me why I came to Montreal, I think it's much more than the tax credits. I think there's a critical mass that is quite high – it's over 6,000 people. I don't know many cities that could say that. I think the second point is that this critical mass is growing. That's because there are

Alain Tascan (vice president and director general, EA Montreal)

Stephane D'Astous (director general, Eidos Montreal)

Pierre Proulx (general manager, Alliance Numérique)

Alain Lachapelle (director of MIGS, Alliance Numérique)

Martin Walker (CTO, AZM)

EXPRESS



good schools that are training good people at a good rate – maybe not as fast as we would like. But we have a system in place that helps us to keep this critical mass growing. And also Montreal has a lot of industries – the movie industry, the animation industry, there's the entertainment industry, there's Autodesk and Softimage... So I guess there's much more than the gaming industry.

What about Montreal's position within the world of digital production, historically?

Alain Tascan: Oh yeah, it all started here, right? There's a history of digital image-based companies and special effects. More in terms of game content, if you look at everything done here I think there's a speciality in thirdperson action and adventures.

Yannis Mallat: If we look at why people are coming, it's also important to look at why people are staying. In the case of Ubisoft, what we found here

that made us stay is the talent – the talent that we found that helped us to make triple-A games and thus put Montreal on the map.

Andre Lauzon: Actually, one thing is the talent of entrepreneurship. EA Mobile was founded from Exacto, which was bought by Jamdat. The presence of EA Mobile in Montreal is due to the founders of Exacto, and so that's homegrown here.

Stephane D'Astous: And some people were asking why didn't we choose a name for the studio, a random name, and I insisted on having Eidos Montreal. Because with Montreal – and I think EA obviously did the same thing – I think Montreal has a branding, a very strong branding in the industry, so why not put both together?

Yannis Mallat: With a group as large as Ubisoft – and I'm sure it's the same with EA – our marketing people actually want to put Ubisoft Montreal on the products that come out from here.

Stephane D'Astous: And this refers to *Prince Of Persia* – correct me if I'm wrong – 'Ubisoft Montreal presents...' And that's a strong statement.

Lewis Glover: I think in terms of the actual talent pool, one thing that's key for Montreal is that at one end we have test houses such as ourselves, and then we have the developers, and then we have publishers. Because we have those all in one city we have this sort of talent growth. I mean, people come into our company and they become testers and they get enthused – as guys who are enthused by games naturally get. They want to go into junior production roles and then we get the whole talent growth that's feeding into each company.

The word 'talent' has come up quite a lot during our discussions – do you think Montreal just has something about it in terms of creativity?

Stephane D'Astous: I think so, yeah.

Yannis Mallat: I would say that talent from Quebec, culturally, is a mix of two really different cultures: the European one, which may be the one more into art, but also the people here in North America, and obviously they consume a lot of Hollywood and US mainstream culture – entertainment which puts Montreal and Quebec in a good position for creating never-seen-before things.

Dr Paul Kruszewski: I think that's it. It's that mix of cultures, of Europe and America. You live like a European and work like an American, which I think is a good thing, and that's why we're going to be competitive. There's really nowhere else in North America – apart from maybe San Francisco – where you can have that kind of feeling. And that's what sucked me in here. I came for my PhD almost ten years ago and stayed. It's a sticky place. Once you get here, you'll stay.

Montreal seems to have a museum or art gallery on every street corner – these things must feed into the region's creative outlook, too.

Andre Lauzon: Montreal got its metropolitan stature in Canada around the Olympics. We were the strongest, financially, in Canada. Toronto took over

on that aspect and we needed to focus on something, we needed to be the best at something, and I guess the creativity, all the entertainment, the creation of this place was a decision of the government to really focus their efforts to create something worthwhile in Montreal.

There's a lot of culture and creativity here, but do the local universities also give you good talent at the grassroots level?

Stephane D'Astous: The ratio, first of all, is quite high in Montreal. We have four major universities – two French, two English – so that's a very good start.

Alain Tascan: There's this understanding of worldwide entertainment – there's a twist that makes it original and different, you know? The best example we can give right now is Cirque de Soleil: whether you're in Germany or Houston, Texas, at the same time it talks to the masses and there is this originality. There is a big respect here for culture in general – it's an important position to be an artist here.

Martin Walker: But there's a big design community in Montreal as well. I was at an art event outside of the industry and they were saying that Montreal has got all this design and art that's embedded in the

"In Montreal you live like a European and work like an American, which I think is a good thing. That's why we're going to be competitive"

culture, that's spreading wild inside the area, and that contributes a lot to the game industry as well. It's not just all about the technology – it's about the creativity, it's about the art.

Stephane D'Astous: But I think it's the balance between tech and art that's key because this is the most technological artform I know of.

Do game developers here really think about games in terms of them being an artform?

Yannis Mallat: There's one guy in Montreal who describes a big, marvellous company like Ubisoft as 'technotivity', and I think he's right. When you understand that creativity also occurs thanks to technology, that suits the definition for sure.

Alain Tascan: Firstly and importantly, is it an important question? If you look at the modern, the hundred-years-old understanding of art, it's like you don't care about the public, right? It's art for art's sake. And in this respect you're not an artform since our job is to have a promise of entertainment that's





enticing enough for people to reach into their pocket and fish around for \$4.99 or \$2.99 to \$60 or 60.

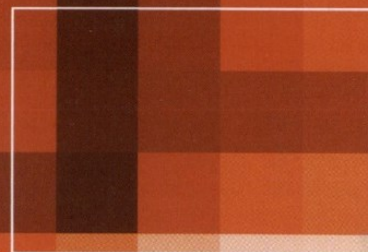
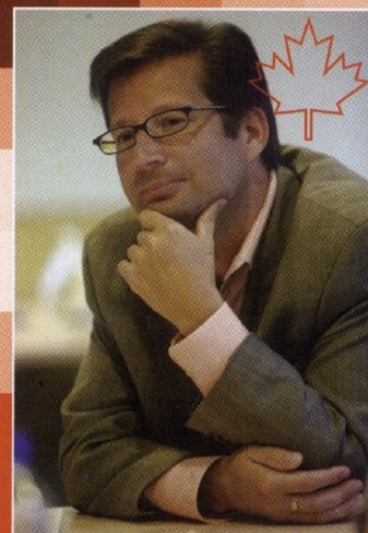
Stephane D'Astous: I think it becomes an artform when you're really pushing the envelope. If you want to do vanilla ice cream, anybody can do that, but if you want to really create something I think a lot of the technology and a lot of the creativity must be put together.

Let's talk about Alliance Numérique and its role within the game community in Montreal.

Pierre Proulx: Well, the main thing we're doing is the Montreal game show [MIGS, the Montreal International Game Summit]. It's not only there for the needs of the gaming industry in Montreal, but Quebec. This will be the fifth show, and we go from strength to strength.

What was the main motivation for establishing the show?

Alain Lachapelle: The first motivation was to build the Montreal community, to help it to be strong, and then to network. There was also a big motivation to have it come from people outside of Quebec, outside of Canada.



How is the event structured?

Alain Lachapelle: There's basically three events in one, so if you've been to GDC it's similar to what happens there. We have conferences with keynotes – there are four or five keynotes this year – and we had 60 conferences divided into six tracks. The second component is the exhibition for major companies of Quebec, Canada and also abroad. And the third one, launched two years ago, was the business lounge where people do what we call business speed-dating.

And do the publishers and developers around this table get a lot out of MIGS?

Yannis Mallat: It's important for the industry to make sure that you can take concrete stuff out of these events. Without MIGS there wouldn't be any such event where we can actually meet and talk and exchange points of view on our jobs, and I think that's important for people in the games industry.

Dr Paul Kruszewski: Also, it helps bring more people into the city because we can talk about the talent. The talent is great here but I think we all agree the more the merrier. We'd all love to take double.

Martin Walker: MIGS is a good showcase of what we can do in Montreal, how we're also bringing in people outside of the industry.

How highly do you think the government values the game community here?

Yannis Mallat: When Ubisoft came in 1997 the

people from the government we found here were actually more businessmen than politicians, which makes things move forward. The support for entrepreneurship and initiatives was definitely helping the industry to structure. You know, 12 years ago, if the government had not talked to Ubisoft and vice versa, we would probably not be here talking about the industry.

Stephane D'Astous: It's much, much more than just tax credits. That's a dangerous oversimplification. I want to stress that point: it's not just taxes, it's a whole package.

Does the way outsiders focus on the tax-break issue ever get annoying?

Yannis Mallat: Why would that be annoying?

Alain Tascan: They're just jealous.

Martin Walker: The tax breaks are now appearing in more countries. Not every day, but every now and then you'll hear about a credit in another country. Another day, another one, so in another five years everyone will have some kind of tax credit to help. But if we didn't have the talent, no matter how many tax breaks we got, we wouldn't be able to do what we've done in the industry.

Alain Tascan: It's a great accelerator, it's a great way to convince people. It's nice. It's nothing that is in our control in the long term so it's tough to put on the business plan, you know? Because in ten years how can you guarantee that? But we like it. It's very simple

so that's good, and it's applied to jobs rather than infrastructure so it's less to manage.

What level of skills training is there here?

Stephane D'Astous: The government won't just leave a company around here and say: "OK, see you next time". I think they really help you to build and start up, as we did 18 months ago.

Do you find that university graduates can hit the ground running?

Stephane D'Astous: [Laughs] There's always a few exceptions, those that are really true, great talent. I think you have to have a good schooling process to allow for good recruits, and I think the average at bat, as we say in baseball, is pretty good. And I think they really contribute faster than what we expect sometimes.

Martin Walker: Several universities are actually putting programmes in for design, audio and programming for art that are geared to what our needs are, so maybe there's a bit less training that we had to do to get them up and running.

"How many cities in the world are actually putting out that many triple-A videogames? I can only think of Montreal"

How have the universities gone about doing that? Have they consulted you?

Martin Walker: They've actually put together some consultation committees and we looked at different programmes with them. I've participated on several committees not just at the university level but at the college level as well for art and design. I've spoken with the engineering side, but since the dotcom demise, enrolment has kind of gone down on the engineering side. But they see now that having something games-related in their programmes is attracting more and more students to universities.

And how many of your staff have been asked to talk at universities?

Dr Paul Kruszewski: I'm invited pretty often so I talk about once a year on a specific topic. I think they do a great job of training people, but from a practical level I give them hell every time. I tell them, for the love of god, have them take a C++ class just once.

Do you need to attract recruits from outside Montreal too?

Stephane D'Astous: I think it's a good balance between local and interior recruits. We were very pleased to see that we were able to attract lots of talent from the UK, from the States, from Australia.

Yannis Mallat: Yes and no. When you have such critical things going, such as working on triple-A titles... I don't want to ruin it, but how many cities in the world are actually putting out that many triple-A videogames? I can only think of Montreal. That by itself works as a fantastic recruitment for talent.

Lewis Glover: It's good to have a mix of people – local people, with people coming in from out of town, so I think it gives them a perspective as well. A general point is the success of the industry in Montreal and the problem that we have is actually getting people faster – we constantly have ad campaigns running.

What about the attractions of Montreal beyond its strengths in game development?

Yannis Mallat: It's funny, because I remember when I came to Montreal ten years ago I had the feeling of coming and living in a North American city. In our





industry you feel that you're making history in what's to come. You know, we're working on convergence, we're working on some pretty edgy subjects, and there is this vibrant thing in Montreal. There is a huge cultural aspect and there is a big underground community, you know what I mean?

What do you actually mean by underground?

Yannis Mallat: Everything that makes your daily activities a little more artsy and edgy. To me, Montreal is this special human-scale city where things happen.

Pierre Proulx: Even if we are small if we are compared to New York or Paris, we are still a cosmopolitan city. You have a lot of culture here, you have some different languages spoken here – you have Italian, Greek, Portuguese...

Stephane D'Astous: We work hard, as Paul said – we work at the fast rhythm of North America, but after work we are more European than American in a lot of respects.

Martin Walker: When summer hits, man, do we have fun outdoors. Spring, too. You have festivals one after the other on streets nearby. We have the

jazz festival, the comedy festival, there's the Formula One... So, yeah, there's a lot of stuff that makes people go outdoors. And even in the winter we enjoy the outdoors with skiing.

Dr Paul Kruszewski: There's a certain licence to cut loose here that's definitely not in the rest of the country. It used to be called the designated smoking area of Canada. You'd see people come from Toronto, they'd come from Vancouver... It's not like going crazy, it's just like they feel liberated. And they're like: "You can be like that?" And that *joie de vivre* is very unique to Montreal, more than anywhere.

Yannis Mallat: It's the San Francisco of the east.

Alain Tascan: Historically, Montreal has been like the troublemaker kid on the block. Canada was very puritan – no offence to anyone. Here it was more like the party town where people from the university, from Toronto, were coming here just to party.

How important are the festivals here?

Martin Walker: They close down the streets for them. There's all these free festivals, these free shows. People come in droves. People come out to listen to



the free shows and the free music. Of course, there are some paying venues associated with that but I mean it's all about the community, sharing some activities that are free outdoors.

Lewis Glover: The jazz festival is internationally renowned but when I got there there were 18 stages. OK, right, well, what do I look at? It's all about great atmosphere and people go there and have a laugh and a drink but there's never any trouble and it's just really, really exciting. Somebody said to me: "There's so much going on, this is incredible", and I said, "Yeah, but we've got to cram everything in to five months of the year".

Martin Walker: It's also very safe. You walk around at three o'clock in the morning and there's still crowds of people in downtown Montreal. And it's good for raising kids, and you feel secure that you're in a safe community and a safe city to a certain extent, and you know it makes a difference. The downtown area is quite populated after five o'clock. If you go to the States, it'll be five o'clock and the city is empty.

How bad are Montreal's winters, really?

Dr Paul Kruszewski: Let me tell you, you have to live it here. And as Martin was saying you can go and do so many activities. You can walk in the snow, you



can do skiing, you can do everything, but you then have to live it. October: 16 degrees celsius. When that mark hits, everyone puts their jackets on. Six months later, the same 16 degrees, everyone removes their jackets and that's when spring comes out. Once you know that, just live the winter and it's awesome.

Andre Lauzon: You have to be well equipped. If you're coming from elsewhere we're like: "Oh, that's your winter jacket? Wrong. This is what you're going to wear – you're going to put this in your shoes and then you're warm".

Alain Tascan: You can ski at night, so people will leave the office at five and be on the slopes at six.

What about the obsession with hockey?

Stephane D'Astous: Well, it's your football.

Alain Tascan: It's bigger than football is in the UK.

Martin Walker: In fact, when we win at hockey that's when we destroy the town, not when we lose.

Does the entire mood of the city change depending on how the team is doing?

Dr Paul Kruszewski: Oh yeah. Creativity in the office goes way down. It's like, "Please win", because you know the next morning...

And what about competition with other areas – maybe Vancouver? Is there a healthy rivalry?

Stephane D'Astous: Well, we're jealous about the Rockies.

Yannis Mallat: The weather. I prefer, you know, one winter, one spring, one summer and one fall instead of just all the rain.

Alain Tascan: It's a lot like Europe for us. Being west coast or east coast is as different as being a Los Angeles guy or a New York guy. The lifestyle is so different, the people are so different, the cities are aesthetically so different that you know they're too different to be rivals. Talk to Toronto now and I'm sure it's another story, but Vancouver is like the cousin from the west.

Lewis Glover: To put it into perspective, I think I'm correct in saying that we're technically nearer to London here than to Vancouver, and that gives you an idea of the distance. It's a long way.

On a serious note, we've seen job losses in the UK, in Vancouver, and beyond. Is that something that concerns you in Montreal?

Yannis Mallat: I can answer for Ubisoft. We're not seeing that at all, we're not suffering at all. We've invested half a billion dollars in recent years and we're growing by 3,000 people by 2014, and I'm sure this growth has been planned in regard to the market. So we're not seeing that at all.

Martin Walker: As for an independent developer, we've grown, like, 30 per cent yearly for the past five or six years. We've never, ever had to let people go for a lack of projects or a lack of work.

Alain Tascan: You have to think about how the UK market was mature way before us and went through different stages of conservation. I remember starting the business ten years ago and there were pretty major companies in the UK. And the cost of making games has gone up. It's tough to make a prediction beyond three to five years. I think the next three to five years should be pretty good to all of us here. I mean, the market is growing – 45 per cent so far. Here I think we have more momentum than ever before.

So what's the most pressing issue facing the development scene in Montreal?

Martin Walker: Talent. I would say talent. Well, when I say talent I mean good stuff. It's one of the big ones we have to wrestle with every day.

Alain Tascan: It's trying to find the new talent fast enough.

Yannis Mallat: If we were to choose one issue to have, it would be this one. It's good and bad news. We are in a very dynamic industry and I think we'd all agree we need to find the talent at a faster rate. Now the good thing is that it's a common challenge



"We're not suffering at all. At Ubisoft, we've invested half a billion dollars in recent years, and we're growing by 3,000 people by 2014"



that could, should, include all parties – the government, all the players here, universities – and so there is nothing that should stop us meeting that challenge.

Martin Walker: That's one of the things that actually brings us together around the table. Whether it's dealing with government programmes, with schools, universities, trade shows – we're all interested in that.

Would you say the relationship between all of the publishers here has improved over the last five years?

Stephane D'Astous: I think we have a common goal, which is to bring Montreal to another level, and we're all working towards that. It's not worth it to threaten the others. We're all here on the same playing field and I think that the relations have never been as good as they are right now.

Alain Tascan: I would say it's improved. We've had a few issues and personally there are a few issues [laughter]. It's improved, so we can talk about it. If it gets worse, then we can't talk about it. So I think there are personal relationships and I think we are in competition, but at the same time we cannot deny other people the right to succeed, you know? Deep down, if you are asking, it's like the Olympics – if we are on the same team, I want to succeed. But them? Maybe not as much as us.





■ **NAME:** EA Montreal
 ■ **LOCATION:** Montreal
 ■ **DATE FOUNDED:** 2004
 ■ **NUMBER OF EMPLOYEES:** 280
 ■ **URL:**
 www.eamontreal.com
 ■ **SELECTED SOFTOGRAPHY:**
NHL 07, SSX On Tour, Boogie, Army Of Two, SSX Blur

EA MONTREAL

The world's biggest publisher is working to change its reputation - and this studio is leading the charge

Electronic Arts has long been marked out as The Enemy among the kind of observers who stomp around the internet calling for fresh ideas and commitment to innovation over sequels and licences. Of course, it doesn't matter to these people that the company has created its fair share of new IP since it became the world's biggest publisher.

EA's agenda has been shaken up in recent years, and since CEO John Riccitiello took the helm again the publisher has begun to place a greater emphasis on quirky concepts and fresh IP. While talk of a change in values won't have convinced everyone yet, EA's Montreal studio appears to be at the forefront of the company's drive towards delivering games capable of making even the most FIFA-fatigued consumer sit up and take notice.

Overseen by general manager Alain Tascan, who's likely to name-drop Duchamp and Sartre as often as Miyamoto, EA Montreal has *Boogie* and *Army Of Two* under its belt, two productions whose executions didn't live up to their intentions. More convincing have been its excellent conversions of more recognised properties, including *SSX On Tour* (PSP) and *SSX Blur* (Wii), along with the multiplatform release of *NHL 07*. The studio has confirmed that a

Wii iteration of the formidable and satisfying *Skate* is pencilled in for a release later this year, but is proving coy right now in terms of what its concept team is in the process of cooking up. *Army Of Two* and *Boogie* have proved that its interests stretch across the gaming spectrum, and after those tentative steps we should expect its next wave of original productions to be more confidently and convincingly executed.

EA's Montreal studio is a unique one within the company because it was built from the ground up and boasts a recruitment policy that hand picks its employees. Proud of the fact that many of its workers hail from the creative heart of Montreal, it encourages an open and honest policy of idea sharing and "dignity" between individuals and teams. Is this just the usual press-release puff designed to hoodwink gamers into believing EA has turned a corner? Judging by the insightful and charming values Tascan espouses, and the mood of the office itself, which exudes a calm confidence and energetic buzz, it would seem not. But then EA Montreal already has the games to back up Tascan's claims that a new era has begun. It's what the studio produces next that will really show us how far it can go in shaping its parent company's profile.



Boogie was a hit for EA Montreal across various platforms, but the sequel, *Boogie Superstar*, will be found exclusively on Wii. EA Montreal director general Alain Tascan says that EA's focus is now more in line with Nintendo's ideas of interactive applications



Army Of Two is EA Montreal's biggest success to date, the co-op-focused shooting proving particularly popular with Xbox 360 owners. As well as new IP, the studio has successfully rejuvenated long-running EA franchises such as *SSX* and *NHL*. Alain Tascan attributes the facility's thinking to young, motivated staff



Interview: Alain Tascan

Vice president and director general ■

Do you think gamers' perception of EA has changed recently?

If you see our line-up for EA it's: "Wow, that's cool, that's exciting". It was hurting me years back when it was almost something bad when you put EA on the box. We were kind of the Microsoft of games – never challenging, complacent, nothing new. Now I feel it is changing for the best.

Did the change in focus start here with EA Montreal?

We spearheaded this new direction. This desire for change has been embedded for a while but it was a low priority and now it is a high priority. It's a big boat to turn – 10,000 people – but we are now all aligned.

Do you feel EA Montreal has influenced the rest of EA?

For sure. New IP would have been considered a long shot. What was the last new IP? You have to go back to *SSX*, and that was a long time ago.

People said: "EA is like a villain, so what?" That attitude was successful but it was a short-sighted strategy. But now the company is changing and we have new values.

What do you feel is special about EA Montreal?


It's the first bilingual studio – you're going to hear French and English, plus 18 different nationalities. That makes a difference. It's a young studio too – people aren't jaded. They think: "Hey, the future is ours". We also took a risk early by doing *Boogie* – that wasn't the easiest game to sell.

Within EA, how do you go about creating new IP?

Our goal here is not to be the biggest studio in the world but to do fun stuff and have an adventure together, mixing people together that wouldn't be mixed in other places. That's why we hired a sociologist instead of a marketing person. A marketing person

would take a snapshot of point A and point B and end up saying, "We are going to point C". But a sociologist might try to understand the deep trends. Now we know there's a holistic approach about people – they want to mix mind and body again. It was separated for a while: the sense of touch and feeling was bad – it was an inferior sense compared to intellect and vision. But you see Nintendo coming along and saying touching is good. When you apply these deep trends to our craft, it helps us to understand our audience.

There seems to be a happy vibe here – why do you think that is?

We reward the person who takes the most risks every week. We give him a reward and put a picture of a penguin near him, because the first penguin who jumps in the water is the bravest one. That's why there's always a delay before the others go in, because he is testing for predators. 





ARMY OF
TWO



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MONTREAL



A2M

- **NAME:**
Artificial Mind
And Movement
- **LOCATION:**
Montreal
- **DATE FOUNDED:** 1992
- **NUMBER OF
EMPLOYEES:** 450
- **URL:** www.a2m.com
- **SELECTED
SOFTOGRAPHY:**
*Happy Feet, Ant Bully,
Kim Possible, Monster
House, Scaler, Get On
Da Mic, Scooby Doo:
Mystery Mayhem*

ARTIFICIAL MIND AND MOVEMENT

How a reputation for making high-quality kids' games is a stepping stone towards something altogether darker

A 2M is the kind of developer that doesn't necessarily generate big headlines but quietly and reliably delivers time after time to consumers and publishers. With 450 employees on the payroll it has the capacity to work on over 12 projects at any one time, and has clearly got the balance right between keeping staff morale high while maintaining ruthless efficiency.

But to label A2M as merely 'efficient' would be unfair on a company that prides itself on bringing innovation to each new project. Publishers find a company that's more than capable of completing the outlined brief but which is also able to sprinkle in a helping of game mechanics that may not be expected in such software. It's also notable that – unusually for game development – approximately 20 per cent of A2M's staff are female, a factor that may have helped to feed its reputation for accessible games with social elements.

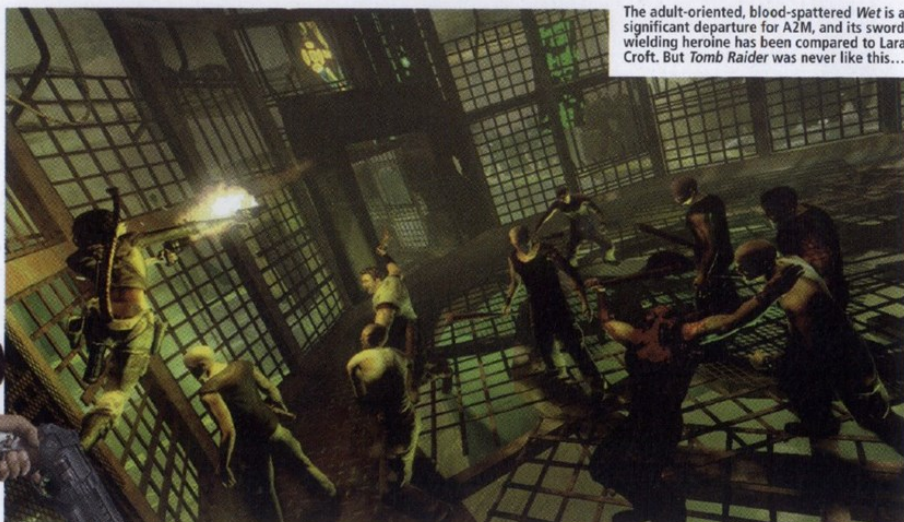
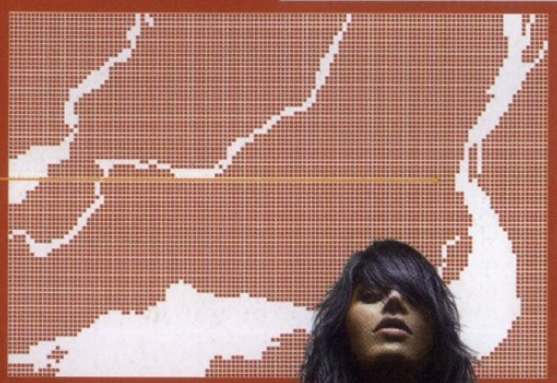
Now looking to broaden its reach with fresh IP, its latest big development is the energetic-looking *Wet*, which if you want the elevator pitch is *Kill Bill* meets *The Matrix* filtered through the lens of a grindhouse movie projector. Other high-profile developers accustomed to working with licensed IP have struggled to break into the more grown-up sector, but A2M has never been afraid to try new things.

Long before *B-Boy* or *SingStar* were even conceived, A2M was spearheading a new direction with music-based games, including *Get On Da Mic* and *Flow: Urban Dance Uprising*. And more recently it impressed many critics with its innovative platformer *Scaler*, a game that sadly didn't get the commercial recognition it deserved.

Take a walk through A2M's offices in the heart of downtown Montreal and the buzz is discernable, with small, eclectic teams working on projects they clearly feel an affinity for. The handheld staff even refer to themselves as the 'pocket squad', many of them preferring the discipline of coming up with strong gameplay components and wrestling with the limitations of the host hardware.

New games on the horizon include further ports of *Kung Fu Panda* (in time for the DVD release), a brand new Indiana Jones game for Wii, *Transformers: Animated* on DS, and a *Lord Of The Rings* licence also for Nintendo's handheld. But this is the tip of a hefty iceberg given that A2M is the kind of company that's in the unusual position of deciding which projects to reject rather than which to pitch for.

With a solid reputation for delivering quality licensed games and a new commitment to mature IP, it may not be long before A2M's profile is as well known to consumers as it is to publishers.

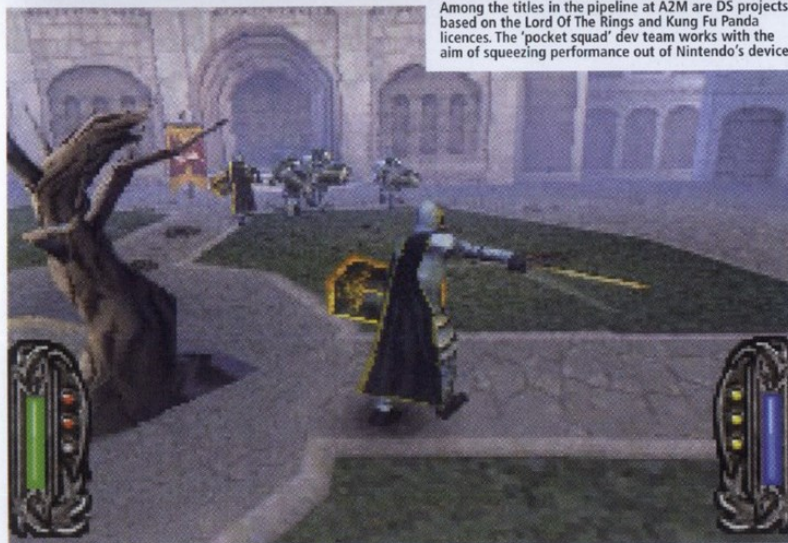


The adult-oriented, blood-spattered *Wet* is a significant departure for A2M, and its sword-wielding heroine has been compared to Lara Croft. But *Tomb Raider* was never like this...





Among the titles in the pipeline at A2M are DS projects based on the Lord Of The Rings and Kung Fu Panda licences. The 'pocket squad' dev team works with the aim of squeezing performance out of Nintendo's device



Transformers: Animated is based on the popular Cartoon Network show. Naturally, players can assume the role of Optimus Prime

Interview: Rémi Racine

What percentage of your studio is focused on new IP and games aimed at older players nowadays?

We have people assigned to create new IP and we have a prototype team. I'd say about 25 to 30 per cent is focused on creating new IP. In 2005 we decided to do more gamers' types of games. We still do kids' games and girls' games but the mature games became important for us, and we now have the staff to do that. We hired specialist people to do the gamers' games. These titles include *Wet* and *Indiana Jones*. Our scope is much larger but it's still in the same genre, mainly character-based games.

Other developers of kids' and licensed games have tried moving into the mature market with limited success – how have you gone about making the transition?
It's not easy. I don't want to compare

ourselves with anyone else but when we decided to do gamers' games we hired the staff to do it properly. We had ex-Ubisoft people and got in some British guys. The key people on game design came from external sources because we didn't have internal expertise. The creative director for *Wet* came from the *Splinter Cell* team and the creative director of *Torment* worked on the first *Grand Theft Auto*, and that shows in the products.

Does it rankle that there always seems to be a divide between what consumers think about kids' games and what critics think?

It annoys me, yes. I remember one review of our game *Scooby Doo*. The guy starts his article by saying, 'I hate *Scooby Doo*', and he finished by saying, 'It's one of the best kids' games I've played and an awesome use of the

licence – 61 per cent'. Something like that – I don't remember exactly, but around 60 per cent. What can you do? We did *Kim Possible* in a year – a truly great game, and we got 78. If it had been *Mario* instead of *Kim Possible*, it would have got 90. We're not trying to compete with hardcore games. These games are for kids and we are appealing to the kids' audience, which can be aged six to eight.


You moved from Quebec City to Montreal a number of years ago – what was behind that?

Before Ubisoft came to Montreal we had 40 staff in Quebec City. Montreal is a very cultural city with creative industries in production, TV and so on. The attraction for doing entertainment in a new way was here in Montreal. When Ubisoft arrived, the government also put a lot of emphasis and PR into the game development sector.

President ■

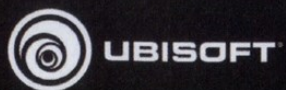


You obviously have a large client list – what do you think A2M has that is attractive to publishers?

The first thing is that there's always a date and we are reliable. And we make good products. Of course, triple-A titles need extra time. Look at *Assassin's Creed*, which took an extra year, and you can understand why. Or over at EA there's *Army Of Two* – that needed six months more. Those kinds of games need that extra time. But when we take on a project we are very good at delivering. 



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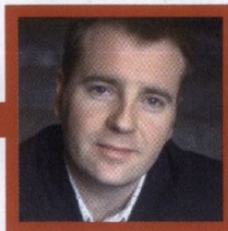
- **NAME:** Ubisoft Montreal
- **LOCATION:** Montreal
- **DATE FOUNDED:** 1997
- **NUMBER OF EMPLOYEES:** 2,000
- **URL:**
www.ubisoft.com
- **SELECTED SOFTOGRAPHY:**
Tom Clancy's Rainbow Six, Prince Of Persia: The Sands Of Time, Far Cry: Instincts, Splinter Cell: Double Agent, Assassin's Creed, Naruto: Rise Of A Ninja

UBISOFT MONTREAL

Arguably the jewel in the crown of the French publishing giant's wide network of dev studios



According to Ubisoft Montreal CEO Yannis Mallat, the belief that IP is all important extends from the studio floor to the boardroom. Ideas may not be immediately turned into games, but they won't be ignored



CEO ■

Interview: Yannis Mallat

Since 1997, Ubisoft Montreal has gradually taken over an old textile mill in a fashionable area of the city. But this is no Victorian-style workhouse with an emphasis on productivity over originality – the studio is now well established as a hub of creativity, responsible for titles such as *Assassin's Creed*, *Prince Of Persia* and *Splinter Cell*. Now, with the company acquiring digital effects firm Hybride Technologies and gearing up for the launch of a new *Prince Of Persia*, Ubisoft isn't about to rest on its laurels, says CEO Yannis Mallat.

In recent years Ubisoft has put an emphasis on new IP – does that come from Paris or Montreal?

It comes from both. We are very lucky because the top management is extremely content-driven – they know what a good game is. At the headquarters at Montreal we realise the value lies within the IP.

You had a big hit with *Assassin's Creed*, but how many concepts do you generate to get one hit?

Any good idea has room to exist at Ubisoft Montreal. We might not tackle it now, but we have room and talent for any good idea and we will keep it on the stack. We value our creators, and those guys are closer to the market than we may think.

You're using a very stylised visual approach for *Prince Of Persia* – with games like *Okami* failing to ignite retail, is that a big risk to take?

Yes, it's a risk. But we have to take risks otherwise we'll end up chewing the same piece of gum. We

believe in the vision of our creators, and we are here to surround them with the proper environment so their vision shines. We trust them.

When Wii was first announced, Ubisoft was the only thirdparty publisher to really get behind it. In retrospect, that must be satisfying.

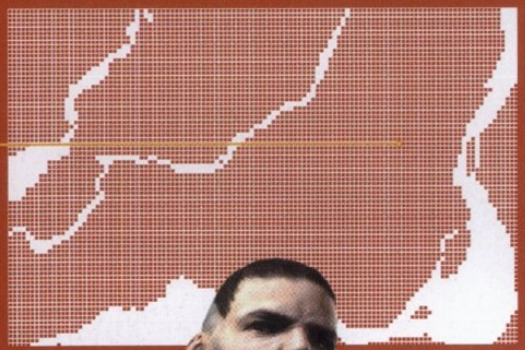
It is. I remember we had seven launch titles from each operation. This is within our philosophy to be where the market is driving forward. The Wii was visionary and we bought into that. Also, if you were to spend a month at a studio you'd see that, on the philosophy side, we are close to designers such as Nintendo.

Ubisoft has been rising up the publishing ladder, but will you ever challenge EA's dominance?

We don't see that as a goal. What we are trying to do is continue delivering qualitative and creative new experiences. The consumers will choose. Until now that process has translated into very good results and growth for Ubisoft.

Ubisoft acquired Hybride Technologies and has a digital effects studio in Montreal – how do you plan to integrate this into game development?

We want to be part of shaping the future. We're talking about development cycles but now it's our role to think about the next cycle. First we opened the CGI studio, then we bought Hybride. We keep on merging those processes, not just for making games but for merging emotions and those experiences. That is creating the future.





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EA MOBILE

After buying out Jamdat, EA's mobile division is ready to take on all-comers. Scrabble is just the beginning...

- **NAME:** EA Mobile
- **LOCATION:** Montreal
- **DATE FOUNDED:** 2006
- **NUMBER OF EMPLOYEES:** 374
- **URL:** www.eamobile.com
- **SELECTED SOFTOGRAPHY:** *TetrisPop*, *The Sims 2*, *SimCity Societies*, *Scrabble*, *Boom Blox*, *Bejeweled*, *Monopoly*, *The Simpsons: Minutes To Meltdown*



EA Mobile's reworking of *Tetris* for Apple's iPhone demonstrates how classic concepts can be adapted to fit around both the hardware and the needs of a mobile-phone gamer



Interview: Andre Lauzon

Executive producer ■

EA doesn't do things by half. Five years ago its mobile ambitions were unclear; now, it can claim to be the biggest mobile developer on the planet. Based within a luxurious shopping precinct in the heart of Montreal, EA Mobile's studio is bigger than most large-scale console developers'. With 374 staff and growing, it can be working on "dozens" of projects at any one time. Although the first few years were spent mining its rich seam of licensed brands, executive producer **Andre Lauzon** says it now has ambitions to develop new IP – which could have other mobile developers vibrating in their boots.

Mobile development is clearly a key area for EA now – what kind of challenges do you face?

I think mobile is the best area to be in the games industry today. With mobile you always have to go to the core gameplay. You can't shake chocolate and sugar over the game; there's no room for a lightshow. What's important is the core gameplay. You have to make it fun. You need super-good people to make it like that. When we look at a new platform coming out, like the new Blackberry or the iPhone, these are great gaming platforms and they're very exciting. If you look at what happened in the last year, platforms are evolving so fast, especially in terms of casual games.

Is it tough trying to come up with new gameplay concepts for mobile handsets?

We did the new casual version of *Tetris*. I find it's very rewarding thinking that millions of people will enjoy that game. You know what's amazing: we would not

create *Tetris* today because you can never win – the gameplay is not short and it's too hard. So actually *Tetris* can evolve and we said to ourselves we can have a more mobile version of *Tetris* that has several minigames that are simple to play but hard to master.

How do you decide on which IPs to work with?

We do a lot of Hasbro licences and we obviously have our own licences. We really do focus on the top stuff, the cream. They are great games to work on. I can't believe I've worked on *SimCity*. I mean, I played *SimCity* on my Mac a long time ago and I'm working on it today with *SimCity Societies*. It's so much fun and we have a lot of scope to come up with our own features and elements. We do have a few new IPs in development but we need to balance this in terms of revenue. We haven't developed much new IP in the last year and a half, to be honest, because when the deal was made with Hasbro it was like: "Oh my god, which do we choose to begin with?" Having said that, we are working on a couple of new IPs now.

What kind of talent are you looking for to fit into your studio here?

We're looking for people with a creative and open mind and a desire to grow in the mobile area. Everyone here is happy to be in mobile. There can be a perception that gaming on mobiles is a lower genre, and I suppose to a big \$40m Xbox game in a way it is, but in a way it isn't. What's amazing here is that the teams are small and everyone owns a slice of it. They find it's so much more fun.



The Sims Bowling is tied to the *Sims* brand but was created exclusively for phones, showcasing EA Mobile's access to strong licences and platform-specific development



WWW.EIDOSMONTREAL.COM





EIDOS MONTREAL

New beginning, new studio, old brand. Why has one of the UK's biggest publishers bought into Montreal?

- **NAME:** Eidos Montreal
- **LOCATION:** Montreal
- **DATE FOUNDED:** 2007
- **NUMBER OF EMPLOYEES:** 185
- **URL:**
www.eidosmontreal.com
- **SELECTED SOFTOGRAPHY:**
Deus Ex 3



Despite a turbulent few years, Eidos has grand plans for its Montreal studio, aiming to employ 350 staff by the end of 2009



Interview: Stephane D'Astous

Director general ■

Eidos has been through the mill in recent years. Its financial saga has included buyouts, share slumps, takeover rumours and wholesale management reshuffles, so it's curious to see its most recently formed studio in such rude health. Eidos Montreal was founded just over a year ago but is already 185 strong and growing. Working on one of gaming's most revered IPs in the form of *Deus Ex 3* is a factor, but it's also ramping up two more projects in the near future. With IO and Crystal Dynamics joining Montreal under the banner of Eidos Studios, we asked director general **Stephane D'Astous** what's behind the publisher's ambitious vision in 2008.

Why choose Montreal for the new studio?

Eidos wanted to build a new studio; they didn't want to acquire a new studio because that had been the previous trend. They acquired Crystal Dynamics and IO, but this time they wanted internal growth. In October 2007 we were 80, Christmas 2007 we were 100, now in July 2008 we are 185. The third phase of our plan will bring us to 350 by Christmas 2009.

So is it the Eidos strategy to build here and downscale elsewhere?

You need to choose your battles; you need to adjust to the reality of the market. We identified that we wanted three main strong studios; the others became secondary. Pivotal had a good history with the *Conflict* IP but that was in decline, so you need to make some tough decisions or the whole ship will sink. It was always on the table that having QA in London was a

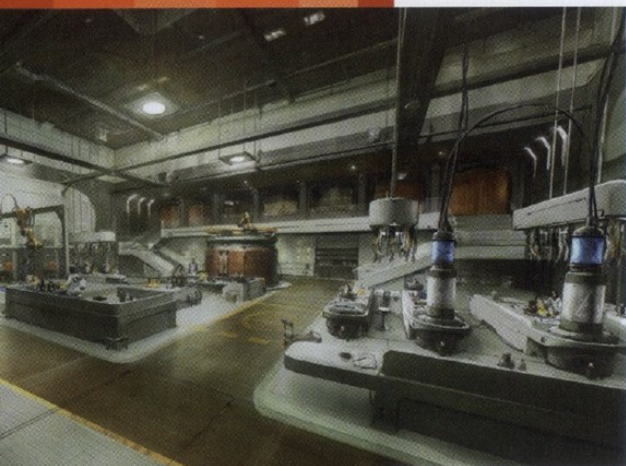
luxury. The square footage in Montreal is 70 per cent less, and we have tax credits. I think we've recruited all the testers we have because all the people here are permanent. And they jump to this location.

And what kind of relationship do you have with Crystal Dynamics and IO?

Phil Rogers, the new CEO, called upon 12 people to come to London to have a crisis meeting to put things back on track. We sat down for a week and spoke for 20 hours a day. We're a small company, we had to realise that, and to become competitive we need to find innovative ways to become competitive – share technology, share training, share knowledge. All the GMs of the other studios were waiting for that. We've received people from Crystal Dynamics for a week's training; we've sent people there to learn their engines. People at IO are offering their services. It's very open.

Is there a new direction for *Deus Ex 3*?

If you ask fans what they want they say: "Base it on the first one and ignore the second one". I think we've put our finger on what worked well in *Deus Ex* and what didn't work in *Deus Ex 2*, and we also want to bring something new to the table. It's a much more complex game than, say, *Gears Of War* because it has so many features: stealth, hacking, combat, dialogue – it's much more sophisticated than a straight shooter. *Invisible War* did some things well but not sufficiently; we've been able to evaluate what was working. Like *BioShock*, we also want a visual signature and we have artists we believe can do that.



Little is currently known about *Deus Ex 3* other than what can be gleaned from its industrial-looking environment concepts

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BABEL

BABEL MEDIA

The Brighton outsource specialist is expanding on a global scale, but what new challenges does it face?

- **NAME:** Babel Media
- **LOCATION:** Montreal
- **DATE FOUNDED:** 2005
- **NUMBER OF EMPLOYEES:** 360
- **URL:** www.babelmedia.com



From small beginnings in East Sussex, Babel has grown into an international testing and localisation company that employs hundreds of staff in Montreal alone



Interview: Lewis Glover

Director of quality assurance ■

Back in 2000 we visited a small localisation studio in Brighton. That studio has now grown into a powerful industry force with offices in LA, New Delhi and Montreal, so it's fair to say the company has seen massive changes in the intervening years. **Lewis Glover**, director of QA, tells us a little about life in the Montreal office.

How much has QA and localisation changed over the last five years?

What we've predominantly found is that we were doing traditional localisation testing at home and functionalisation testing here, but now we're getting more diverse requests. A lot of clients don't even know what kind of testing requirements they want because the landscape is changing so rapidly. More online testing, more wi-fi testing, more downloadable content – there's been a lot of changes. There have also been changes in the amount of languages. Now there's eastern European and Latin American Spanish.

Is there a discrepancy between what your new recruits expect the job to be like and the reality?

Yes. It's not just sitting there testing games because they can't play it how they'd like. For example, in a racing game we might just want someone to crash into a barrier to test the collision system.

Do you believe that it takes a certain mentality to thrive in Babel's business?

Yes, I think it does. This business is a very hectic and active one especially at certain times of the year. We

don't have the luxury of two hours a day training. People have to get up to speed quickly. The benefit, though, is that there's always unlimited overtime for those who want to work it.

What kind of training can new recruits expect?

We currently have a three-day training plan, but we're looking to reduce that by one day. We're looking into a new unit being built where we have proper classroom facilities allowing us to train more people at once in a shorter time because it will be more direct.

Presumably it's getting harder to eliminate bugs from the types of games being made nowadays.

All types of software will be released with bugs, whether it's a game or other types of software. Our job is to eliminate them as much as possible. And this also depends on the client, who sets the quality bar and the budget they want to put into the process.

The testing and localisation environment can be very demanding – what kind of benefits beyond salary do you offer your staff?

One of the key things that drives people is seeing their names on the credits. And I think one factor is that our staff can work on killer titles all year round. We are dealing with triple-A titles from some of the biggest publishers. Babel has also always had parties that have gained a good reputation. It all comes down to expanding the business and being mature in the way we retain our staff. If someone has done an exceptional job we will reward that.



Staff training is taken seriously at Babel – perhaps unsurprising given the new and evolving challenges it is facing, such as online testing



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Montreal skyline from Old Port







BY N'GAI CROAL

PLAYING IN THE DARK ...because people refuse to see

The art of the matter

For those of us who write or think about videogames seriously, the question 'are games art' has ceased to be a question that is particularly interesting. Those like the American film critic Roger Ebert would prefer to draw a line in the sand between Art and Not Art; others, like his one-time sparring partner Clive Barker, would rather defend this still-developing medium from assailants. Personally, I'd prefer to address those who already accept games as a valid form of expression, because among those of us who feel this way, there remains a divide far more worthy of exploration. It's the divide between the people who feel that all videogames should strive for is to entertain us, and the people who believe that games are capable of more — even if developers, critics and players alike are still struggling to figure out what that is and how it can be achieved.

Look at the various reactions to Jonathan

whom he made many mistakes which have caused her to become distant. The text reads, in part: 'Our world, with its rules of causality, has trained us to be miserly with forgiveness... What if our world worked differently? Suppose we could tell her: "I didn't mean what I just said", and she would say: "It's okay, I understand", and she would not turn away and life would really proceed as though we had never said that thing? We could remove the damage but still be wiser for the experience.'

On the surface, this passage is simply a way of establishing the world and its main character. If we look a bit closer, it is clearly a metaphor for the time-rewinding mechanic that is Tim's core ability in *Braid*; sure enough, the introductory text for each of the worlds in some way draws a parallel between the time ability/power contained within that world and an aspect of Tim's life.

Another related criticism targeted *Braid*'s puzzles and their accessibility, or lack thereof. Garnett Lee, the 1UP Yours podcast host who struggled with the game before giving up, said these are the sort of puzzles that are designed to make the people who solve them feel smart. The Brainy Gamer blogger Michael Abbott, for his part, complained that *Braid*'s mechanics made it impenetrable to the non-gamers who would have been drawn in by Blow's ambitions. 'It's a shame to me that a game with *Braid*'s narrative, artistic, and aesthetic aspirations is inaccessible to so many people hungry for exactly those things', Abbot wrote. 'I want my friends — the painters, poets, musicians, and philosophers I work with every day — to experience for themselves what videogames can do and say and mean. I believe they will meet us halfway if we offer them a reasonable hill to climb and a meaningful experience for their efforts. I wanted *Braid* to be that game, and I'm disappointed and a little sad that it wasn't.'

Is *Braid* guilty of interactive pretension? Again, I don't think so. From where I sit, *Braid* had to be made in the way it was in order to express what Blow wanted to express and make it accessible. Platformers are about as accessible as game genres get; 2D side-scrollers even more so, because they give us complete situational awareness without requiring us to control a camera. Similarly, some have suggested that the time abilities should have accrued like a *Metroid* game, allowing us to use each ability we've acquired at any time, but that would have either broken the game or confused us — to say nothing of the complicated control scheme that such a design approach would have mandated. *Braid* may or may not be perfect, but it is exceedingly well thought out at every level, and if that's pretentious, please, let's have more of it.

N'Gai Croal writes about technology for Newsweek. His blog can be found at blog.newsweek.com/blogs/levelup

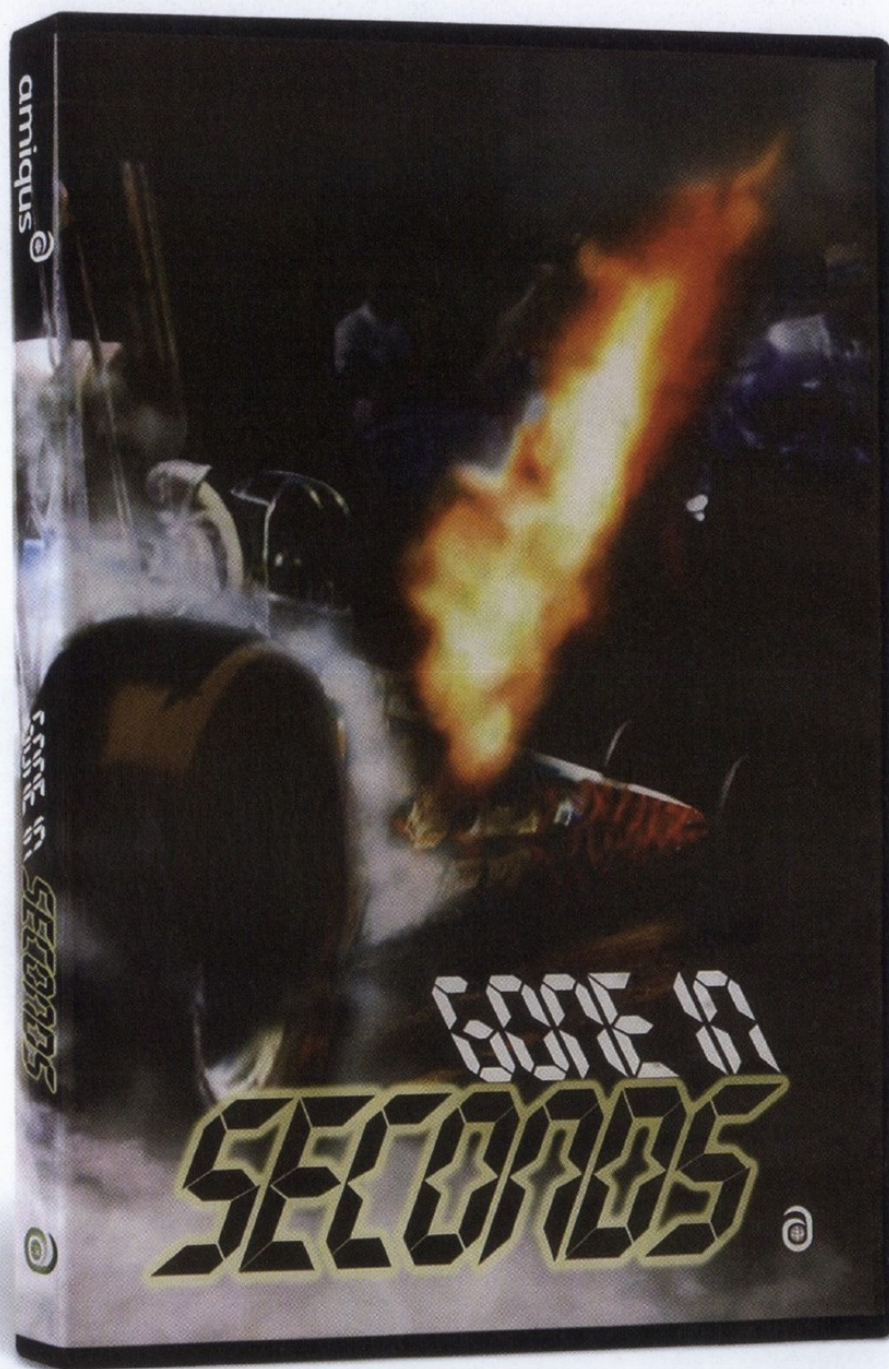
The term 'pretentious' generally obscures more than it reveals, but it often speaks volumes about those who throw it around

Blow's Xbox Live Arcade game, *Braid*. Some immediately applied the term 'pretentious' — to its storytelling, its gameplay and even Blow himself — as a way of dismissing it. In my opinion, the term 'pretentious' generally obscures more than it reveals about the subject matter under discussion, but it often speaks volumes about those who throw it around without much reflection.

This includes those who gave the game good reviews, but were critical of the text blocks for being, well, pretentious. Take, for instance, the first set of books in *World 2: Time and Forgiveness*, after which we're introduced to the gameplay. We're informed that our protagonist, Tim, is on a quest to rescue his princess, with

Yes, the prose is more florid than what we're used to in a typical game, but not offensively so, and it's far less so than even pop fiction, let alone literary fiction. Yet this mere effort by Blow to reach just above videogame mundaneness for something more evocative of his artistic intent — not to mention perfectly in keeping with *Braid*'s painterly backgrounds and Celtic-themed score — was enough for the p-word to be slapped on to his game. Had *Braid* employed *Portal*'s minimalist approach to narrative and pared back on his text blocks even further, he might have avoided the label. But because Blow opted for allusively written clarity over sparsely written mystery, the label was trotted out.

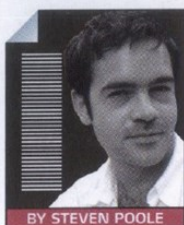




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GAMES



BY STEVEN POOLE

TRIGGER HAPPY Shoot first, ask questions later

Echoes

There is something haunting about the posable wooden human figures designed for artists. The head a smooth blank mask; expressionless and sexless, the human body reduced to its geometric essence. *Echochrome*'s protagonist is one of these mannequins, hinting perhaps at an allegory of the relationship between player and game. The wooden doll in the artist's shop is a mere tool, a puppet to be manipulated in the service of a project about which it knows nothing. When you play a videogame, are you an artist manipulating your digital wooden puppet as you like on the screen? Or are you instead the puppet itself, led by the nose through a series of arbitrary contortions according to the artist-designer's purposes, in a weightless dance that soon fades into nothingness? 'Congratulations', the game says at the end, 'you adopted all the poses that were required of you. Now you can

more creatively with visual ambiguities, to learn from the perspectival games of Giovanni Piranesi or M C Escher. And here is an Escherian universe come to life, with those iconic eternal staircases, and a vertiginous sense of architectural fluidity.

The gorgeous string-quartet compositions of Hideki Sakamoto certainly represent one of the outstanding achievements in videogame music – not simply because of the novelty of hearing a string quartet in a game, but because the way the spaces between the four string voices expand and contract independently, breathing the harmony, furnishes such a perfectly appropriate sonic counterpart to the game's central idea: the expansion and contraction of the spaces in the environment as the perspective changes. Distance yawns both on screen and in the music, and is then collapsed to unison or consonance.

ends up spinning the world aimlessly until the 'right' answer appears by chance.

After a few tens of levels, I stopped playing. But the game's atmosphere persists strongly in my memory, convincing me that *Echochrome*'s path is an admirable one. Videogames built on speed, colour and explosions are great, but there ought also to be space for what we might want to call quiet gaming. Gaming that requires you to think, and look, more deeply than usual, where restrictions of the aesthetic palette (in terms not just of vision, but also sound and kinetic potential) can force us to find a richer experience in what seems muted or obscure. There are hints of this in games like *Flow*, or even the much-maligned *Myst* series. I am not thinking of merely a 'chillout' game experience, but a species of simplicity that would engender greater intensity, that would demand and reward more work and deeper engagement, rather than treating us as (dis)posable wooden dolls.

In this way, *Echochrome* reminded me of my experience in a couple of New York museums this summer, looking at Ad Reinhardt's 'black' paintings. At first they look simply like canvases painted entirely black, and you think: 'Yeah, yeah'. But stand in front of one for minutes, and let your eyes adjust: you see they are not completely black, but also contain impossibly deep reds, greens or blues, arranged in ghostly cruciform patterns. The thunder of the city outside subsides and you are transported to a place of whispers and ghosts. It's almost a meditative experience; or, according to your preferences, perhaps a religious one. There is joy in shooting down helicopters and bitch-slapping giant mechs, but there's no reason why videogames couldn't also set off further down the road to a place like Reinhardt's.

Steven Poole is the author of *Trigger Happy: The Inner Life Of Videogames*. Visit him online at stevenpoole.net

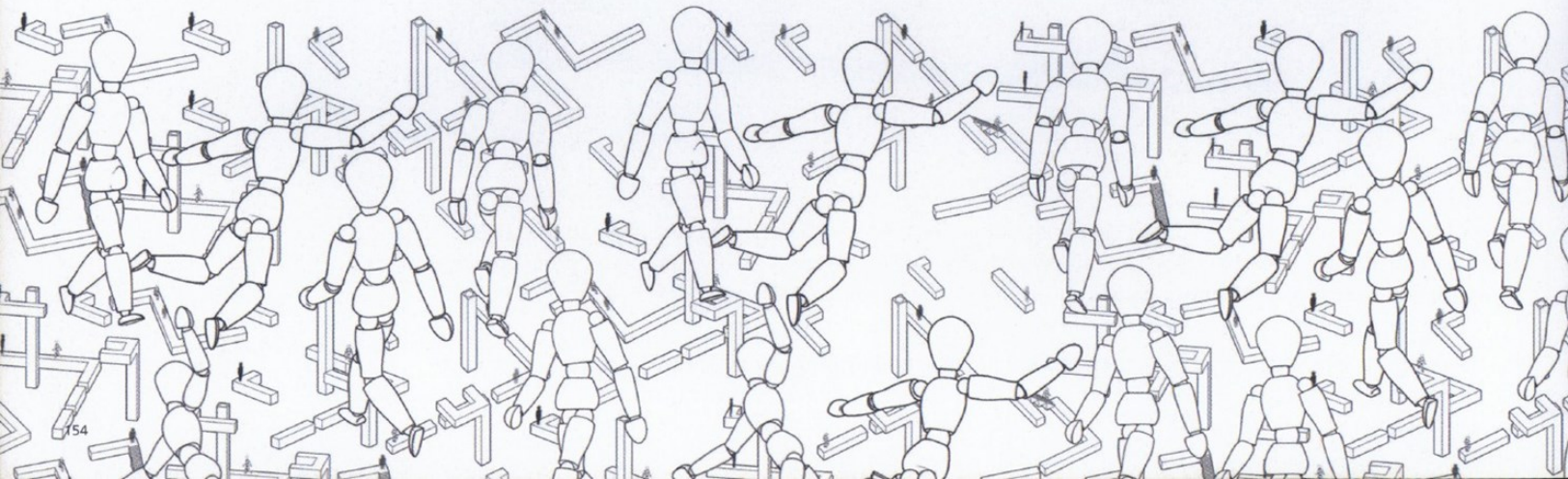
Games built on speed, colour and explosions are great, but there ought also to be space for what we might want to call quiet gaming

climb back into your cardboard box until the next time'.

In *Echochrome*, you don't even control the mannequin. It flails dreamily as it freefalls between levels, then lands on a plane and begins walking, intent on forward motion at all costs, heedless of environmental risk – rather like the human race itself. You are cast as – what? – a benign god, whose point of view creates reality: if you cannot see a gap, it isn't there, and so your articulated (but inarticulate) figure can cross it.

I'd like to believe that *Echochrome* is one of the most important videogames of the last few years. I had, after all, expressed the wish in *Trigger Happy* that games ought to play

The overall effect of *Echochrome* is one of surprisingly powerful melancholy, and one can only wonder at Sony's crassness in packaging the game, in the west, with lurid happy colours and a photograph of a woman spurting think bubbles, as though this were one of those pony-training games for kids. Presumably the marketing droids didn't trust, or understand, *Echochrome*'s beautiful austerity. This same austerity, however, also leaves the game's mechanical drawbacks visible in uncomfortable relief. Too often, one senses the nagging hand of the designer, hurrying you past an angle that ought to represent a solution but which has pre-emptively been deemed a too-easy shortcut. Too often, one



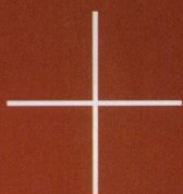
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BY RANDY SMITH

HI, I'M RANDY Videogame design, etc

How long should games be?

Like a toilet flushing in reverse, the starfield swirls back into existence. Hyperjumps are never precise, so you check the map to see where you wound up and are crestfallen to discover that you're on exactly the wrong side of the huge ion cloud in the middle of this system. The verdict is that you are royally screwed. You over-reached in your last mission, and now your attempt to limp back to spaceport is doomed. You've traversed this ion cloud dozens of times under better circumstances, so you know the odds are high you'll be ambushed by those annoying pirates whose ships look like alarmed jellyfish. Your tattered armour won't hold up in a fight. With your pilot in the infirmary, you've got no chance of ditching them in an asteroid belt. Your useless comms officer never cracked their channels. You're just going to have to think of something. You push the throttle forward...

imbued it with the dramatic context that makes it work. You've dealt with this ion cloud before, you know what you're likely to encounter, you have a few stock tactics you normally employ, and you know that none of them are going to work this time, which means you've pooped the proverbial bed. Way to go.

A key ingredient of this experience is repetition. The world is designed to have you criss-crossing the ion cloud all the time, learning the parameters of its random encounters via repeat exposure. It can take several hours to establish that familiarity. This leads into a tension that's central to bringing games to a wider audience.

Devil's Advocate #1: "Hi, I'm an adult now. I have important responsibilities like being angry about politics and drinking until I soil myself. *Mass Effect* might be the best game

only to get kicked out because the plot decided we were done. A good game should keep opening up, should build by adding novelty and complexity, continuing to reward my investment. A game that rushes to get finished in two hours is either going to be so thin as to be trite or a flash in the pan that leaves me wondering WTF just happened."

A beautiful thing about media is that they come in lots of formats. Literature has novellas. Music has rock operas. TV has the miniseries. As an innovative show like *24* will show you, there are always fresh ideas for making the best of their various strengths. So hopefully there's no need for us to go apeshit and forever banish an entire duration range of games.

Smash Bros is just one example of a short, repeating core experience with incredible versatility and depth, which makes it perhaps the haiku of our medium. The latest, *Brawl*, sports what may literally be history's most enormous metagame system, whose staggering vastness exists primarily to drive the player back into exploring combat mechanics. At first, trying to beat five metal Bowsers using only Yoshi and some parasols seems like it's going to be a drag, but then you realise you're being prodded into mastering some arcane corner of the possibility space, and it's actually kind of cool.

Smash Bros does a decent job of satisfying both Devil's Advocates, but it does so in part by punting on story continuity: any place you leave off is as gratifying as any other. This means it's not going to deliver player-owned moments embedded in a larger narrative like the one above. If *Smash Bros* represents our haiku and *Mass Effect* represents our epic poem, what fills the comfortable mid range? What's our equivalent of a two-hour film?

Randy Smith is a lead game designer at EA's LA studio. His current project is a collaboration with Steven Spielberg

A good game should keep opening up, should build by adding novelty and complexity, continuing to reward my investment

Other than the specific shape of the spacecraft (and perhaps a few other minor details, such as genre), we've all had the experience described above while playing a game. I believe you can only have that precise experience while playing a game. To pull off the same moment in a film, there would be an earlier bit when the captain explains to a passenger how the ion cloud is dangerous, and you'd realise that you were being set up for a future scene. In a book you'd get to see right inside a character's mental process as he contemplates the ion cloud, but even then you're being told about it. The important distinction of the videogame version is that you've forged this realisation yourself and

ever fathomed, but I'd never know because I don't have 100 hours to spend sitting in front of a computer like I've never heard of hygiene. Can't you give me a game designed with my lifestyle in mind? Maybe one that takes as long to play as a movie does to watch? Maybe one that doesn't require repeating mindless tasks a billion times before the next interesting thing happens?"

Devil's Advocate #2: "Four hours might be long when you're sitting on your hands absorbing someone else's story, but it's barely enough time to scratch the surface of a well-designed game. I really don't want to feel like I'm just starting to get the hang of the systems, like I can finally take charge of the experience,



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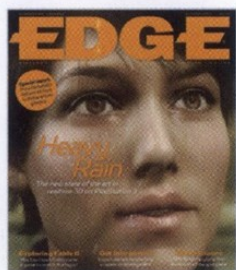
The fibre optic difference

There are two main types of broadband in use today: copper wire and fibre optic. The former technology has been around since the 1870s, while the latter uses strands of pure glass as thin as human hair to transmit data at the speed of light. One is struggling to keep up with the demands of today's web, while the other is from Virgin Media. Point your browser at the URL below to see how the technology stacks up...

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Issue 193

F ONLINE OFFLINE

Choice cuts from
Edge Online's
discussion forum
forum.edge-online.co.uk

Topic: Final Hurdle

Falling at 'em. Most recent incident was *Mass Effect's* ludicrous final boss fight. What makes developers want to plonk insurmountable hurdles at the end of games?
Blocks100

It's a crap boss, sadly. Similarly, I've never finished *KOTOR* on account of the last boss actually being impossible because my Force powers choices were wrong. Now THAT is crap.
Dan Dare

Metroid Prime nearly got snapped in half at its final boss battle. Each attempt took me the best part of an hour of seriously intense finger contortionism from the final checkpoint. I felt awesome when I finally did it though, one bit of health left when I dealt the killing blow.
StarryVeck

Damn, thought this was going to be about *Track & Field*. I fall at every bloody hurdle on the steeplechase in that.
Voice of Reason

I never thought I'd lament videogames becoming 'cool'. Being able to sit in a wide variety of social circles and discuss the latest releases is a nice feeling. But is it me or has the new image come at the cost of maintaining it? Back in the days when the PSone was still just a 'PlayStation' there wasn't a demand on games to keep up appearances for the casual observer. Take 3D platformers, for example. When developers were trying to top *Super Mario 64*, they were at liberty to have an orange

at people who have only the most fleeting acquaintance with a D-pad. If I want something that will offer me a challenge or some depth I'm thus forced to find a decent human opponent and play *Smash Bros*, or I have to play as a grizzled mercenary in a series of increasingly dark and depressing corridors. Don't get me wrong — I like *Gears Of War*, I adore *GTA*, and *Web Of Shadows* looks like a great direction for Spider-Man, but still, sometimes I'd like my games console to be something just plain fun.

Am I the only serious gamer who still thinks leaping around a TV-themed world as a Leslie Phillips-voiced gecko sounds like a fun idea?

bandicoot or a small purple dragon as their main protagonist. They were also free to allow such games to rely on 'the platforming' to justify their product's existence.

With *Crash* and *Spyro* now struggling to do something they'd nailed two generations ago, and even the hallowed *Banjo* deciding to abandon his roots, it seems that there aren't any 3D platform games left to compete with the famous plumber. *Jak* has slowly moved away from his roots, and *Ratchet* is only marginally holding on, with both franchises seeming happier on a handheld where the tiny screen can't be observed by passers by, or else playing with enough cars and guns to distract from the original premise. Only *Mario* and the 2D platformers' 'retro chic' have enough credibility to warrant marketing to the *Gears Of War* generation of skilled gamers.

Nintendo has filled the market with fun and friendly games but, as you noted in last month's 'Nintendon't' article, they're almost exclusively aimed

Something to brighten life rather than thrust me into a pair of battered combat boots and force me to take out my frustrations on the post-apocalyptic army du jour.

Am I the only serious gamer who still thinks leaping around a TV-themed world as a Leslie Phillips-voiced gecko sounds like a fun idea?

James Winters

The distinctly chirpy *LittleBigPlanet* should deliver the goods, and don't be too quick to write off *Banjo-Kazooie: Nuts & Bolts* (see p64). You may also be able to find more of what you're looking for on the DS headed your way.

The PSP is a brilliant piece of kit, isn't it? Internet access. Folders for music, videos and downloaded games. The ability to play games and UMD movies everywhere. It really sounded like a brilliant deal, didn't it? And yet here we are, three years on, and the only games really worthy of consideration are *Final Fantasy VII*:



Letter of the month
wins a DS Lite

Crisis Core, *Metal Gear Solid: Portable Ops*, *Silent Hill* and, maybe, *LocoRoco*. "Surely it couldn't be that awful!" you cry in desperation. "Surely there's more than four or five games worth getting!" But, unfortunately, those who've decided to get this handheld device are going to be sorely disappointed. If you are into soccer management sims, sub-par movie licences and platforming games, then fine. But what about the rest of us? The more violently inclined, more hardcore gamers? Are we to be shunned? Left in the cold while the DS shows off an impressive array of games? I ask you this because a year after receiving my PSP, I have a measly collection of five games. Maybe I'm too picky, maybe it's just because I'm just not interested in enough genres. Or, maybe, Sony needs to get its act together and cater to other parts of the gaming community. I'm not saying there are no games for the action community. All I'm saying is that without the right stick, shooter and action games don't feel the same. They dish out plenty of games but fail to refine the controls.
Christopher Shaw

You've definitely overlooked some PSP titles worth considering. *Syphon Filter: Logan's Shadow* is good. And *SOCOM*:

Tactical Strike, God Of War: Chains Of Olympus, Pursuit Force, GTA: Liberty City Stories, Killzone: Liberation...

Your article 'Nintendon't' (E193) summed up the feelings I have had regarding Nintendo and their current strategy of abandoning 'hardcore' gamers with a lack of titles which many fans my age (I'm 28) are crying out for. I would have taken the plunge on a Wii around the time of *Mario Galaxy*'s release, but I held off; a little because I didn't have the funds, but mostly because I wanted to see what happened in terms of the software being released beyond that. And, while I obviously feel disappointed to have never played Mario's latest, I felt vindicated in my decision, and after reading your feature, I still do to a certain extent.

However, after finishing the issue, I began to think. Of the many millions of new gamers arriving on the scene

Whilst I may not buy a Wii just yet, I think there's a very good chance I could purchase its successor because I now feel the future's never been so bright

thanks to Wii, how many will enjoy their experience to an extent they want more? And, beyond that, how many will master their new hobby as it currently stands, and demand something more challenging, deep and complex? When our beloved pastime first went

mainstream, things were simple and attracted thousands of people to the medium as a result – many of whom, like myself are still avid fans now. What's not to say even a small proportion of these new gamers go from an introduction via *Wii Sports* or *Brain Training* to a love of *Geometry Wars*, etc? And if they do, canny developers will cotton on to that and produce games accordingly.

So, whilst I may not buy a Wii just yet, I think there's a very good chance I could purchase its successor because I now feel the future's never been so bright. And, while I'm waiting for the cycle to complete, there's always my Xbox 360...

Russell Halford

An interesting point. *Everybody* needs to play *Super Mario Galaxy*, though.

I was just reading *Edge* 193, specifically the *Spore* article, and

getting quite engrossed. I flipped the page to 68, but across on 69 something caught my eye. Yep, Will Wright's quote: "When players talk about powerful experiences they had in other games they never describe the cutscene they saw", bolded out for all to see.



Don't be too disheartened by Nintendo's focus on accessibility, says Russell Halford, who believes that with titles like *Wii Sports Resort* the company is just training up a new generation of gamers

F Topic: Advice Wanted for Evil Henchmen and Bosses Hi. I'm an end of level boss and I'd like to improve my skillset and get more out of my henchmen. There's not much work any more for a guy like me so I need to stay ahead of the game. Any advice? Freethinker

Try not to wear anything glowing around an obvious weakspot.

HeThinksAgain

Try killing your attacker in a corridor, from behind. Do this instead of waiting in some large, open and usually deserted arena that you've specifically designed to show off your attacks whilst simultaneously exposing your weaknesses.

Ubermod

Outside your chamber will be an assortment of boxes. These boxes contain (amongst other things) fairies, medi-packs, ammunition for guns and other such tools which can be used against you! By removing such items you stand a much better chance of survival.

Sgt Rock

If it becomes rapidly apparent that your enemy is able to reflect certain attacks back at you, stop using that weapon. Resist the temptation to try this attack again later – they will almost certainly still have this ability.

tin robot

If you insist on residing within a locked room, keeping the key on you at all times should prove problematic for any would-be heroes.

OTOKO

You are not alone. Apply for entry into the National Bosses Union, and see if you can get a group of bosses together to tackle your nemesis. Make sure their attack patterns and moves are different from your own, to help prevent a single strategy from being effective against you. Together, you will prevail.

evil bozz

If all else fails, make a stylish exit and regroup for the sequel.

g.man



Christopher Shaw laments a lack of good PSP games. A quick check of our records shows that 53 titles have scored 6/10 or above since the system's debut in E146

I read it. I read it again. And I couldn't believe the arrogance of that statement.

Has Wright never played *FFVII*, a game that touched millions for its intricate plot – and, of course, *that* cutscene at the end of disc one? Was he immune to many moments of playing *Killzone*, especially the fantastic introduction? Perhaps he's not even attempted to discuss the validity of *Metal Gear Solid 4*'s final scene, after Snake goes to the cemetery?

I could go on. The point I'm trying to make is that a cutscene isn't ever not talked about. It probably isn't the highest of priorities on anyone's list but dammit, it enriches the experience and if it's anywhere near as good as the *FFVII* example, then it does so tenfold.

Will Wright ignores FMV sequences and plot development at his peril. Of course, to declare that is to simply ignore the point he's trying to make with *Spore*, that point being you can make your own path – am I correct?

John Guildford

We think so. He probably simply can't abide cutscenes, though, either, the absolute cad.

A combination of my hate for software updates in games to fix bugs and your recent Region Specific studio profile series got me thinking about a theory that I would like to share with you. My theory is that the games industry and the automotive industry (which I work in) have a very similar approach to launching new products. Obviously the game industry is more glamorous and quick-paced, but I am sure some of the same businesses principles will still apply.

For instance, the lead time to get a product to the marketplace after the initial concept has been agreed would

Continued »

be dependent on the number of platforms it will be used on, the level of innovation in the game, the level of cosmetic upgrade or detail, the amount of freedom the design team have, the testing time required to ensure a good launch, and of course the size of the team for the development of the product and after-sales bug fixes.

The analogy holds true when you compare something like *GTAIV* to the launch of a new luxury sports car: both will have huge levels of innovation in engine technology, both will have massive levels of time spent on looks and style, and neither will be launched without substantial testing. This all places more and more emphasis on the size of the team delivering the products (car or game) being adequate to deliver on time.

With the ever-increasing pressure to deliver the right product to the marketplace, with a level of quality that surpasses the customers' expectations every time, I believe the relatively new and growing software industry could benchmark the mature, well-developed processes of the 100-year-old auto industry. Getting a launch wrong in the auto industry can result in huge expense in vehicle recalls, so having correct development processes is essential. To enable the software industry to reduce bug-fixes or patches after product launches, benchmarking the auto industry would allow some best practice to be shared. There is also great pressure in the auto industry to keep the size of development teams very small as well.

Stephen Buckley

A problem with the analogy is that games rarely need to resort to costly product recalls, especially nowadays, with bug-fixes available for easy download via the internet. We're all for the videogame industry adopting anything from other fields that will make it more efficient, however – so long as it's not to the detriment of creativity, of course.

There was something weirdly familiar about your October issue. The combination of a beefier-than-normal page-count, the day-glo orange straplines and a Deluxe Paint III-style

F **Topic: Little spinning wheels**
What loading screens were done well? The ones in *Dead Rising* that give you glimpses of Frank's soon-to-be-acquired killing methods were good.
Ubermod

MGS4's install screen, displaying health warnings about smoking while Snake lights up, and then advising me to use an ashtray as Snake casually flicks the ashes off his cig, was funny the first time. Shame I had to see it so many times.
Backspace

As a nipper I remember loading up a game on tape and watching it spend three minutes painstakingly drawing a picture on the screen line by line, before spending another five minutes loading the game proper. Some games even went through this process twice or more, presumably to give you something else to look at after the first eight minutes. All I could think was why they didn't go straight to loading the game and get finished three minutes quicker. It was like some sort of anti-bonus game punishment.

Pause

Ridge Racer on PS1 let you play *Galaga* while it loaded. Why don't more games have these age-old classics to play as they load?

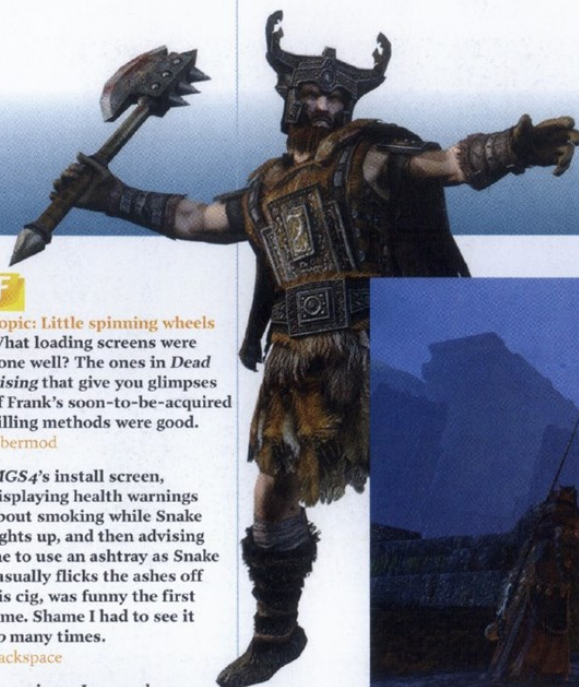
mrt-301

I seem to remember reading that Namco owns the US patent for the idea of loading a minigame while waiting for the game to load up. Namco should be smacked around the face for patenting an idea which will make it absolutely no money, but could make every gamers' life just a little more pleasant.

Yossarian

Ooh, ooh, what about *Mix-E-Load*? Anyone remember that? It was for the Commodore 64 and it allowed you to, as the name may suggest, remix a piece of music on the fly while the game loaded. Actually, now I think about it, it was a bit crap, and not nearly as interesting as it sounds. But it was on the Commodore 64! And that was like years ago!

EssEnnEeEss



Stephen Buckley surely isn't impressed by the likes of *Age Of Conan*, which has used updates to fix issues post-release – although in this case it wasn't so much bugs that were addressed, as breasts

cover image made me flash back to the glory days of Amiga Format – stick two 3.5" floppies on the front and the tribute would have been complete.

Still, kick-ass NARC feature.

Graeme Virtue

There's just something about Amiga owners that refuses to let go of the past, isn't there? What's that all about?

On page 139 of *Edge* 193 you have an excellent interview with one of our students, Sarah Jones. You have, however, given Sarah the wrong degree type – she doesn't have a BA (Hons), she has a BSc (Hons). I should know, I'm supervising her MSc. I would be grateful if a correction to this effect could be printed in the next issue.

Nia Wearn

We certainly hope that Sarah's career in the videogame industry hasn't been in any way blighted by this serious error.

I just wanted to say you guys have been producing some great reads this year. So much so, in fact, that I have been consistently late in finishing my previous issues when the new one arrives; there's just been so much to read and enjoy, you see. I think it all began when you first debuted *Region Specific*. My favourite profile thus far has been the Vancouver issue. I just visited said city for the first time last week, and actually stumbled upon EA Vancouver's office after coming off the

train. I used that issue as a reference while scoping out the city for a possible move in the future. So cheers for that.

Yameen

Next time, send us a postcard, and we'll start some kind of collection. The most exotic effort will win something.

I just wanted to pass on my thanks to James Hutchinson for 50 issues (wasn't it?) of quality game-related gubbins in the form of *Crashlander*. It was a tiny little oasis within the sometimes dry pages of *Edge*, and it will be missed!

Martin Cole

Although *Crashlander* had its knockers (ho ho!), I was genuinely sad to see it finish in *Edge* 193. It didn't make me laugh every single month, but when you compare it to other comics about videogames you will see that it's actually damn good. I bet whatever you have planned to replace it won't be nearly as good, that's all I'm saying.

Mark Turner

The content of the lower half of this page certainly has plenty to live up to. How do you think you're doing?

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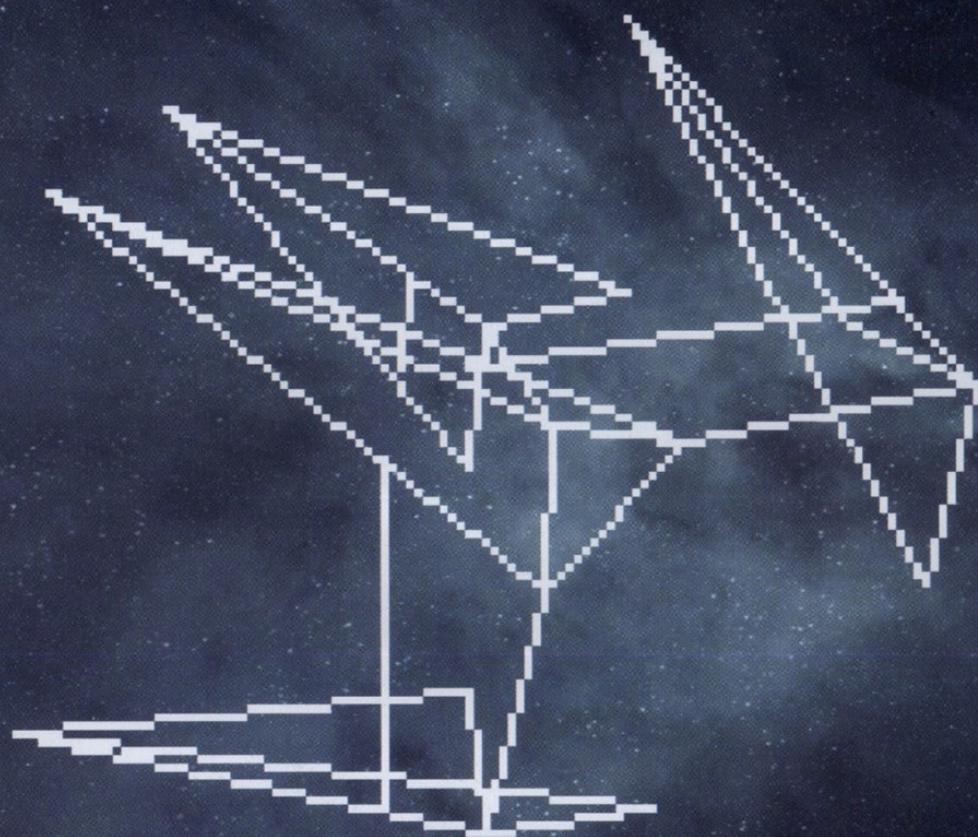


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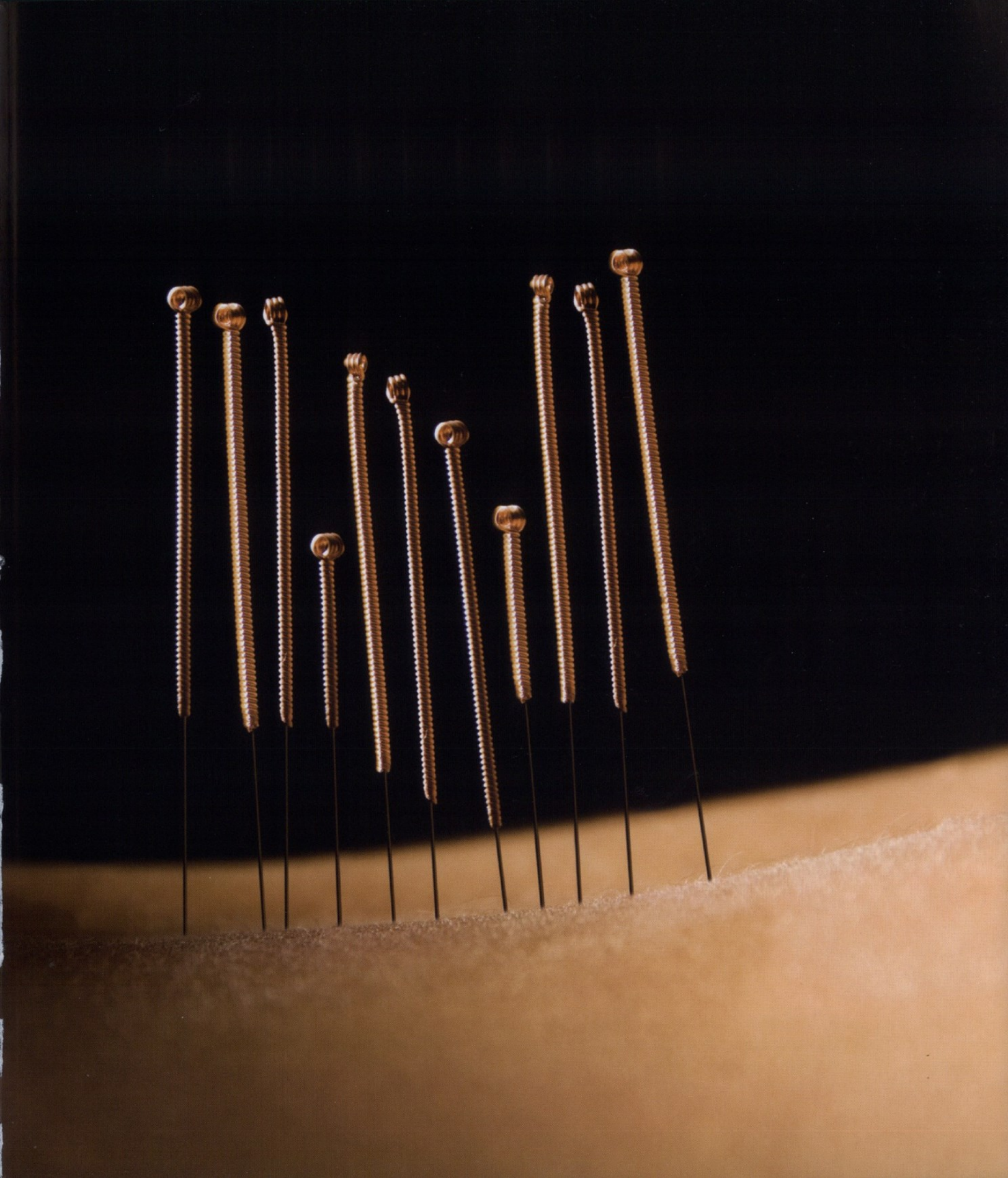
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